



National golfer Jen Goh, who was diagnosed with thoracic outlet syndrome in 2017, now dreams of turning pro and is aiming to qualify for the 2024 Olympics. She trains five to six times a week for about 35 hours at Tanah Merah Country Club and Sentosa Golf Club. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

GenerationGrit

National golfer back on course after battling mysterious illness

National player Jen Goh was on the way to becoming a golf pro when she found that she could no longer move her right arm. But after multiple doctor visits and surgery, the 25-year-old is back in the swing of things.

Goh Yan Han

After a casual round of golf with friends one afternoon in October 2015, national golfer Jen Goh, then 20, suddenly found that she could not move her right arm at all.

Over the next few weeks, the arm began to swell and remained painful to move. But she did not know why – and neither did more than 30 doctors she and her parents consulted over the next two years.

That period of crippling uncertainty was one of the lowest points of her life. Worse, it came during one of her best years of golf – “a blowout year”, said Ms Goh, now 25.

After competing in the 2015 South-east Asian Games, where she clinched a bronze medal in the team event, she won several local events here – the Singapore National Amateur Championship and

GENERATION GRIT
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the Singapore Ladies' Golf Association Amateur Open. It felt like she was well on her way to fulfilling her dream of becoming a golf pro.

She had made sacrifices to pursue that ambition, taking the “unconventional” route of leaving Singapore in her first year of junior college to train. She had been home on a break from studying at a community college in the United States when the injury occurred.

She said: “I spent weeks as a specimen, visiting one doctor after another. After the first week, my mum insisted on checking me into

DEFYING THE ODDS

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“
NATIONAL GOLFER JEN GOH, on staying dedicated to her sport.

the hospital but I was discharged when they couldn't figure out what was wrong.”

It was a bitter blow. “I felt that it was unfair for this to happen to me when I had put in more than my teammates and competitors,” she said. “I watched my friends progress in life, while I was lying in hospital with nothing but a Primary School Leaving Examination certificate. I felt like I was stuck in a hole. I couldn't play golf, and I couldn't go to school because I couldn't use my arms.”

One doctor suggested an amputation, while others prescribed different drugs. But despite their dire warnings that she would never play again, she was determined to prove them wrong.

In 2017, without a solution to her pain, she decided to move to San Francisco and pursue a degree in kinesiology and psychology.

“I was living on my own, managing okay and trying to make a new start. But two months in, it happened again and for nine weeks I couldn't move my arm at all,” she said.

A doctor she met by chance suggested she try exploratory surgery to figure out what was wrong with her arm. Surgery was an option that had never been broached, said Ms Goh.

She found a doctor at Johns Hopkins Hospital who could do the procedure – at a price tag of US\$250,000 (S\$334,000).

Back home, her parents contacted a cardiovascular surgeon. “It was a stroke of luck – he was able to do it and it would be just \$3,000 from my mum's Medisave after my health insurance (MediShield),” said Ms Goh.

She was diagnosed with thoracic outlet syndrome, a condition that occurs when the blood vessels or nerves in the space between the collarbone and first rib – the thoracic outlet – are compressed, causing pain and numbness in the neck, shoulder and arm.

The surgeon removed her first rib and two muscles on the right side of her body, which relieved the compression.

Several months later, she was back on the golf course practising and regaining her form.

She won the stroke-play section of the Singapore National Amateur Championship in 2018 and played on one of the biggest stages of her life, a televised Ladies European Tour event in October that year.

“Life really couldn't change any

faster – just a year before that I had no idea what to do about my arm,” said Ms Goh.

She was also back on the national golf team, though she had to deal with issues such as less range of motion in her right arm post-surgery, as well as the fear that the condition would recur.

In July last year, it did – this time in her left arm while she was playing a tournament in Europe. She came home and had surgery to remove a rib on her left side.

“These experiences have given me a lot of perspective. I know what I have overcome more than my competitors, and that gives me a mental edge,” said Ms Goh, who lives with her mother, Ms Ang Siew Yan, 54. Ms Ang was deputy chief executive of CapitaLand Financial before she retired at 45, and now runs a milk and diaper programme at a charity.

Her parents divorced when she was four years old.

Ms Goh learnt to play golf in Primary 5 when she accompanied her father, Mr Goh Kah Tong, 54, an entrepreneur, on his games.

“Back when I got injured, I was obsessed with golf and worked way too hard. Now golf is not all I care about,” she added. “Golf is like life – you can never master it and every day it's different. It's the most frustrating game in the world, like I'm always chasing perfection but perfection can never be had.”

Perhaps it also gave her insight into her condition.

Mr Calvin Goh, 46, a friend and physiotherapist, said: “I see many athletes who undergo multiple operations and are raring to get back on the field. But Jen was very patient about going through the process slowly and getting through the basics, to take a long-term view.”

Ms Goh is now a third-year psychology and public policy student at Singapore Management University. She works part-time with philanthropic organisation The Majurity Trust. She also co-founded Hopefull – an initiative to encourage children to chase their dreams in the arts, sports and music – with three friends during the Covid-19 pandemic.

“It's partly inspired by what I went through. I hope that kids in situations that might seem hopeless can remain hopeful and adopt a glass half-full way of looking at life,” said Ms Goh.

Despite her other commitments, Ms Goh still dreams of turning pro and is aiming to qualify for the 2024 Olympics.

She trains regularly five to six times a week for about 35 hours at Tanah Merah Country Club and Sentosa Golf Club.

She said: “Now that I'm older and more mature, it's my own decision to play. For three years no one but I believed that I could play golf again, maybe not even my parents who listened to the doctors – but my stubbornness saved me.”

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