

SAM PURDON

A DRIVEN MAN

Sam Purdon is in a fight to make the Canterbury team for next month's men's interprovincials, but with what he's already taken on, that battle is small-fry.

Only last year, Purdon lay in his bed wondering when he was going to die. He had had a tumour removed from inside his head and was full of drugs fighting his brain cancer. He stops short of saying he's beaten cancer, but he's winning at this stage and it's made him a better golfer.

Sam Purdon is 27 and on the surface, the same as most other 27-year-old blokes who play golf.

He wants to buy a house, wants to have a family and is unsure if trying to go pro is what he wants to do with his golf because maybe he just wants to enjoy being a top amateur and keep it fun.

To see his no-nonsense, workman-like game, you'd not think he stands out too much from any of the other members of the 12-man Canterbury squad.

His shortgame is handy, his scrambling first-rate, he's a decent length off the tee, strikes the ball well and in a recent round with your correspondent, casually shot a 5-under par 68 at Canterbury country course Weedons in one of the most relaxed rounds played.

When he takes his cap off to shake hands, the long-time Highlanders fan offers a quick reminder of what he's been through.

Targeted radiation on the side of his head has left a patch of hair a bit lighter. Under that is a scar when surgeons removed a tumour and saved his life.

Since then, golf - as fun as it is - has been a healthy distraction, not the be all and end all.

In late 2015, Purdon was playing

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Sam Purdon during the 2017 Canterbury Matchplay golf championships at Harewood Golf Club over Labour Weekend.

indoor cricket with some mates. He felt a bit dizzy, went outside to get some air and proceeded to have a scary seizure.

He had a number of tests and was initially diagnosed with epilepsy.

"It wasn't until the start of 2016, when I had a full MRI and they found a tumour."

At first it wasn't thought to be too bad - as far as these things go - before a biopsy revealed he was already a few rounds into a fight for his life.

He had chemo and radiation then had a couple of months off the treatment, resting his body for another few rounds.

Golf had been the last thing on his mind, but he was dragged out to play with some mates, then entered the one-round Rawhiti Open at the seaside Christchurch municipal course. And won it.

"I was about to get into the full chemo and it was just meant to be a bit of fun with the boys, but I shot 68 and won," he said.

He became back to back Rawhiti champion earlier this year.

As cheery as Purdon is now about life, golf and his future, he slows down talking about what he went through and the dark places his mind went to.

Taking 16-pills a day, being so shattered he slept to 11 while everyone else went to work, only to get up, not being able to eat or drink - or play golf - had its effect.

"I used to lie in bed and my brain would just be full of these thoughts; when am I going to die, what's happening to me, what's going to happen."

He got dragged out of his house and taken to the golf club to sit in the cart while his mates played. →







"It was about getting a bit of fresh air, but it had such a big impact for me," he said.

"I hardly played, I hit the odd shot, but it was just two hours of not thinking about cancer. I was like, 'f*** yeah,' golf takes my mind off it all.

"And it still does, I can forget about work, forget about any other stresses, forget cancer and just play."

He said he learned a lot, but appreciates golf - and life - more than he ever thought possible.

"I remember playing with dad and Tom Wilson, a mate of mine, and I was still recovering and not feeling great. I made three birdies in seven holes. It was great, I just played golf. And I realised that golf's f***** cool. It's my happy place now. I still have shit days and still get angry, but everything that's happened has put a lot of things in perspective.

"Yes, I've been through some shit, but better people than me have been through worse."



Sam Purdon doing well post surgery.



Golf has been a huge help to Purdon, but nothing like the support of his friends, family and partner Dena Bakkenes - a group of people he couldn't thank enough.

"I wasn't in much of a state to make decisions etc, but they were amazing and without them and their strength, who knows what may have happened to me," he said.

All his scans have been coming back clean and while he won't say

he's beaten his cancer, he's proud to say he's "beating it", still.

Making the full Canterbury team for the Interprovincials at Northland's Mangawhai Golf Club wouldn't match footing it with cancer, but it would cap off a big few years for the +2.0 handicapper.

He's been in the wider Canterbury mix for a number of years and not quite made the six-man team despite being a regular feature in the build-up and wider Canterbury squads since his early 20s.

In 2015 he had to pull out of contention because of what he thought was his recent epilepsy scare, then in 2016 he was on track again, but hit the wall in the Canterbury matchplay quarterfinals.

"That was four rounds in two days and I was still obviously recovering. If I struggled with that, I was never going to be able to play in Toro," he said.

This time around he's "in contention", according to Canterbury convenor of selectors and former New Zealand Seniors player Ian Donaldson.

Donaldson was reluctant to give too much away ahead of a couple of big playing days for his squad, but said Purdon was in the hunt to make his Toro debut.

"We haven't decided on the team yet, but what I will say is, as far as I'm concerned, Sam brings a hugely positive attitude to the team; his determination and to beat what he's had, well, it's inspirational isn't it?"

"He's also done a lot of work to get better and I know all the guys in our team, actually, in the golfing community, think the world of him."

And the man himself believes he's a better golfer, now too.

"Swing wise, I'm the same, but I noticed some changes as soon as I started playing competitive golf again," he said.

"(What I've been through) really helped the mental side of my game. It wasn't like I wasn't caring, but it was more about me letting stuff go and moving on.

"I don't let small things bother me in life, I'm definitely not going to let them bother me on the golf course."

And imagine the effect on his opponents if he does get to Mangawhai - "How do I beat this guy in a battle, when he's already winning a much bigger war"? **▀**