

Driving through the obstacles — continued from page 1



photos by VAL TRUSCINSKI

Gator senior golfer Kianna Novacek (facing camera) shares an emotional hug with her teammate and younger sister Anissah Novacek after finishing her final round at the Section 8A Girls' Golf Tournament and before finding out that she led her team to a second consecutive Section 8A team championship in Bemidji on May 29.



Karen Novacek (facing away from camera) shares a hug with her two daughters and Gator golfers Kianna and Anissah. Karen wasn't surprised her daughter Kianna returned from her ACL injury, always believing she could thanks to her determination.

During her junior season, she led her team to a section team championship and seventh place state team finish. Then, as a senior, she returned from her ACL injury to lead the Gators to another section team championship and a fourth place state team finish— an accomplishment she is proud that her team achieved. During this state tournament, she shot a two-day score of 179 and earned a twelfth place finish—both state tournament career bests.

Getting to the state golf tournament her senior season at times didn't appear to be a possibility to some after she suffered her ACL injury.

"(After my injury) I didn't even think about, 'I can't golf in the spring' until I called my coach (Brady Johnson) and he said, 'Kianna, you're not going to be able to golf,'" Kianna said. "And I was like, 'What?' ... I was worried about not playing basketball anymore, not about missing a whole season of my favorite sport (golf)."

As for recovery, Kianna and her family discovered that it usually lasts six to nine months. Asked what she thought when she first heard about this, she said she thought about golfing left handed instead, given this injury occurred on her left leg. As a right-handed golfer, she puts all her weight on the left leg at the end of her swing. She didn't make this switch though.

"I wanted to golf. That's all I wanted to do," Kianna said. "And if I would have switched... there would have been no weight on my left leg, and now that's what I pivot and turn on when I swing. And I still struggle. At state they watched me and they could tell right away that I would really favor my leg."

She had goals going into her senior golf season and didn't want this injury to deter her from reaching them.

"I was just so dead set on I just need to golf because last year after my junior year I had such a bad finish at state and I was just like, 'This (senior season) was suppose to be my year to really make it up, improve it,'" Kianna said. "I had all these high goals and then when I tear it (ACL), I'm like, 'No, I'm golfing because this is suppose to be my year.'"

She would have surgery on February 18 and then the work to recovery began, one filled with many tears. She did admittedly encounter some negative thoughts during this process.

"To people I think I was more like, 'Yeah, I can do it,' but by myself I always had doubts of like, 'Can I actually do this?' And so that's probably why I worked a lot harder," Kianna said.

Kianna's mom Karen wasn't surprised her daughter returned from this injury, always believing she could thanks to her determination. Coach Johnson has called Novacek a fierce competitor in the past and, when asked about her comeback, he explained how her determined personality as both a person and athlete was on display.

"She was not willing to give up her senior year as a golfer. She wasn't willing to give up on herself. She wasn't willing to give up on her team and she knew what she had to do to get back against many odds and against all kinds of adversity," Coach Johnson said. "... It's really a phenomenal story that we even had her back. Her athleticism and her personality will certainly not ever be able to be replaced."

Heidi Pagnac and Jessica Kuznia led Kianna through her physical therapy. They, along with her surgeon, played instrumental roles in her recovery.

She did "miraculously well," even surprising her surgeon, Karen said, but if she were working to return to any other sport, she would not have been given the go ahead. That doesn't mean she didn't face some adversity when she returned to her first official golf action of her senior season on May 2.

Due to the surgery, she encountered some knee problems and, as a result, struggled to find padding that would go around that knee with her brace. During the season, she experienced a setback after carrying her clubs at a Border Conference meet in Roseau—something she was told not to do. She couldn't walk for a few days as a result, and she skipped a meet in Fergus Falls to heal up in time for the sub-section meet.

For Kianna, the bigger obstacle during her senior golf season was not necessarily the golfing itself, but walking through the courses, from the steep hills to the pesky sand traps. Her goal, when she first returned to action, was to just finish 18 holes. To help with this issue, she would get a pushcart, so she didn't have to carry her clubs. She quickly raised her expectations.

Regardless of her injury, she held herself to high standards. After finishing her rounds at section, but before finding out that her team had advanced to state, she shared an emotional hug with her teammate and sister Anissah. Disappointed and drained in that moment, Kianna relayed a message to her younger sister:

"She's (Kianna's) like, 'I'm sorry. I could have done better,'" Anissah said.

Kianna shot a two-day score of 182 at the Section 8A Girls' Golf Tournament—the second lowest individual score at the tournament— to lead the Gators to a second consecutive section title. Going to state as a team meant more to Kianna than just going as an individual. Leaving her team was the hardest part about ending her high school career. Her team was more important to her than her scores.

"It (my team) is going to be irreplaceable for sure. They were my favorite, closest thing I had to family besides my own," Kianna said. "... If I couldn't bring my whole team (to state), it's almost like than why should I go? We're supposed to all go as one person."

Asked how she wants to be remembered, she paused for a short time before pointing to leadership.

"I guess the most important thing to me throughout the whole thing—and I think I realized this when I wasn't playing—was my teammates being able to rely on me," Kianna said, "and knowing that I could be a really, really good leader on and off the course."

Kianna would still carry her high individual expectations from the section meet into the state meet. After shooting a score of 86 on the first day at state, she stood in eighth-place in the 85-golfer field. To finish with medalist honors, she would need to finish at least eighth following day two's action. She would shoot a 93 to end with that score of 179 and finish twelfth as an individual.

Asked how satisfied she was with the individual finish to her golf career, she said she felt fortunate to return to state, but said she wasn't satisfied at all.

"I really appreciate that people are telling me congrats, and

it is a huge accomplishment to be back. But in my mindset, 'Oh, I'm already back, so now I just have to compete how I could compete (before the injury),' " Kianna said. "And it wasn't there because my leg, even though I was still playing, you saw it on the course... that it was a little obstacle that I couldn't get through, which I expected, but being competitive, I wasn't okay with it."

Kianna finished just six strokes out of eighth place and medalist honors. Her mom Karen said golf is a game one can play in his or her mind and that one stroke or putt here or there can make all the difference, but added how she thought that her daughter was hard on herself.

"She sets high standards for herself," Karen said. "That's why she got through therapy, but I think, I mean, I think she did fantastic."

This mindset lasted until even her final putt as a Gator on the eighteenth hole at state. On this final day at state—an emotional one— Kianna said she cried from the fourth hole to her iron shot on the eighteenth hole.

As she walked along the greens on the eighteenth hole, Kianna said she then "turned off" emotionally. She later made her final putt on this hole and hugged those around her. She felt angry with herself in that moment after competing alongside some of the top finishers, including the state champion, as part of the final group on the final day of the state tournament, believing she could have done better.

Despite what Kianna may have thought about her state finish, Coach Johnson said he would remember this eighteenth hole forever—a moment he described as surreal. During this hole, she hit a five wood down the fairway—what Coach Johnson called one of her better tee shots that day—and then hit a shot into a little crosswind.

"The sun was setting—very scenic—kind of behind the Pebble Creek Club House and she had a 124-yard nine-iron (shot) into a crosswind in front of a huge gallery and she stuck it to about 12 feet (from the hole)," Coach Johnson said. "I'm not particularly sure how she was able to swing the club because I know her eyes were glossy and there were tears forming, and you could see the emotion."

After that shot into the crosswind, she two-putted in for par and her team welcomed her in after finishing with what Coach Johnson called a "well-deserved" twelfth place finish and leading her team to that fourth place finish.

"It was an emotional roller coaster," Coach Johnson said about that final hole. "And I just remember walking down the fairway with her and all these memories, and I just remember how proud of her I was— to see her team watching her finish off a par on the signature eighteenth."

When Kianna went to the score's table following that final hole, she looked up and saw Anissah waiting for her and noticed the little quiver in her lips.

"The little quiver? Did you hear the loon call?" Karen asked laughing, when talking about Anissah's reaction in that moment.

"When I saw her (Anissah), I broke down," Kianna said. "... I just covered my eyes and I just cried and I cried," Kianna said.

A junior this fall, Anissah joined golf during her freshman year. She explained why she was so emotional in that moment at state.

"I was just like, 'Dang, I wish I would have joined golf earlier, so I could play more with Kianna, and it was just so fun,'" Anissah said. "... It was just very sad because now she's done and we don't have another chance (to play together)."

This August, Kianna will begin her academic and athletic journeys at the University of North Dakota. She is red-shirting as part of the women's golf team and, academically, she is planning to major in political science as part of getting into the school's Pre-Law program, interested in becoming a lawyer. She also plans to minor in Spanish and earn her coaching degree. She hopes to return to Greenbush as soon as next year to help coach—not ready to be done with the Gator team just yet.

"I really want to coach even if it's not Greenbush. I want to start there and I want to watch... the rest of them (Gator teammates) going all the way through," Kianna said. "But, yeah, I definitely want, if I can't golf and use that as any part of my career, I want to be a golf coach and help other people golf because it's just a really important thing to me."

Before she fell to the gym floor in pain on that January 7 night, Kianna had that competitive, fierce fire—to set goals and go after them—inside of her. She got off that gym floor, bounced back from an ACL injury, and led the Gator Girls' Golf team's drive to another section title and state tournament berth. This fierce, competitive fire remained lit through her final putt and after she walked off those greens as the last time as a Gator athlete.

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