

HARM'S WAY

UH Golf Star Leonie Harm Finds Adversity Par for the Course

BY CHRIS STIPES

Golf is not for the mentally fragile. Dwelling on one errant shot can surely doom your next. Muscles tighten. Minds race. Confidence cracks. Over-thinking is a golfer's nemesis. In a sport filled with stressful moments and emotional swings, UH alumna and rookie professional golfer Leonie Harm has proven to be as mentally tough as they get. It's no surprise, perhaps, considering the obstacles she's overcome — from a near-death experience to losing a parent — on the links of life.

“I don't want to be defined by what happens to me in life,” she said. “Instead, I want to be defined by what I make happen.”

In 2013, the then 15-year-old rising golf star was jogging near her house in Gerlingen, Germany, when she was hit by a drunk driver traveling 45 miles per hour. Her mangled body was thrown a hundred feet, literally and remarkably landing at the feet of an Army medic. Timing. What are those chances? Given the severity of her injuries, the medic knew to talk to Leonie, who was unconscious, with blood coming out of both ears. “She used her training and acted fast to keep my brain from shutting down and to save my life,” Leonie said she was later told. With a fractured skull, broken hip, ankle, ribs, collapsed lung and a traumatic brain injury, paramedics estimated that she had a 1% chance of survival.

Leonie had other plans.

“The car accident was never so shocking to me, because I don't remember it. It's just like five days that I don't have a memory. Once I woke up from a medically induced coma, I

knew I was alive and I was OK,” she recalled, while admitting she still “can't hear very well” out of her right ear, which has made balance a challenge.

If you don't know golf, balance is kind of important. Sarcasm. It's everything.

Maybe it's her gritty golfer's mentality — one that adapts quickly to different courses and conditions — that helped her miraculous recovery. Just several months after the accident she was back competing, though now off the radar of top collegiate golf programs. The University of Houston was not a top program at the time. In fact, it was nearly brand new. Timing.

Head coach Gerrod Chadwell vividly remembers Leonie's recruiting visit. “She looked me straight in the eye and said, ‘I want to be able to tell my kids that I helped start something.’”

But that “start” almost never happened. Just before her second semester at UH in 2016, Leonie's mother, Desiree, died at 56. It wasn't unexpected, as she had battled advanced stage breast cancer for years until her liver finally failed. Leonie was prepared ... or so she thought. “I ended every conversation with ‘I love you’ so that would be the last thing I said to her no matter when it happened.”

For someone with an easy-going personality full of charm, Leonie was “not in good emotional shape” for some time following her mom's death. Her golf game struggled. Her relationships struggled. Coach Chadwell doubted whether she would even return to the team. “I just tried to be the calm in a storm, so I just listened to provide her support,” he said. “I told her when she came here, this isn't a four-year deal, this is a lifetime thing. You'll always be part of my family.”

Leonie dove headfirst into academics as a biochemical and biophysical science major. She tutored other students. Anything to keep her mind busy and off of the tragedy she just endured. “I wouldn't sleep, because I couldn't sleep,” she said. With the support of the golf team, which volunteered at the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure to end breast cancer on Leonie's first birthday back, she began to thrive. Mental hurdles, much like a gust of wind or water hazard on the golf course, became easier to navigate.

She also found new motivation to complement her upbringing, which instilled the value of hard work and dedication. “Losing a parent, I want to be great for my mom, and my dad too, but he still gets to see it,” she said. “The way I was raised and the culture I grew up in, if you really want something, there's no valid excuse not to achieve it. I had a bad year with my accident and again when my mom passed away. But your entire life doesn't have to be defined by your lows. You move on.”

That ability to “make clean cuts” and find mental balance and clarity through the storm has led to historic success on the golf course: Two-time American Athletic Conference Player of the Year; holder of the top three single-season scoring averages in school history; Cougars'

career leader with four tournament crowns; top-five amateur world ranking; winner of the historic Ladies British Open Amateur; led the Cougars to three conference titles and four straight NCAA regional appearances. In short, extraordinary.

Safe to say the inchoate UH women's golf program is now very much on the map, and Leonie Harm is a huge reason why.

“It's unbelievable the trajectory she set our program on in just four short years,” said Chadwell, who has successfully recruited top national and international talent since Leonie's arrival. “She's on the walls and in the record books, and it just gives us that credibility that this is a great place to be. She's a game-changer.”

After graduating with honors in fall 2019, Leonie posted the following sentiment on Instagram: “Out of my 22 years-worth of life decisions, going to UH was by far my best! It has been a true honor and absolute blast to be part of jumpstarting a women's golf program with such a bright future.”

Leonie Harm truly exemplifies what it means to be a student-athlete. Success on the golf course? Check. Harm recently qualified for the Ladies European Tour with aspirations to one day play on the LPGA tour. Success in the classroom? Check. Harm was named the American Athletic Conference's Female Scholar-Athlete of the Year in 2019. Cure cancer? Don't put it past her. Following her professional golf career, and hopefully many championships, Leonie wants to work as a cancer researcher in honor of her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, who all died of the disease.

“What would your mom think of all these accomplishments? OK now I'm going to cry,” she said, wiping her eyes. “My mom always loved me unconditionally. I honestly don't think all that I've accomplished necessarily matters to her. I just hope she's proud of the person I've become.”

Now that's a hole-in-one. ■

Leonie Harm, biochemical and biophysical science ('19), overcame numerous challenges to transform the UH women's golf program.

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