

Bill Horg took some time to write about his two-day ordeal in winning the Associate Club Net Amateur:

The tournament started on a cool clear Monday morning. On my drive over, which started at 3:45 A.M., I chased the full moon all the way from Fresno to the Monterey peninsula (The moon looked way cool over the ocean! A moonset if you will.) and all I was thinking was "I need to hit some balls and try to relax." When I arrived at the course and walked up to the range, the other players were already milling around, looking for friends in the lines of golfers waiting to hit balls. Not wanting to look too much the outsider, I moved up to a spot and waited for a budding Nick Faldo to finish pureeing a half dozen 3 irons down the range.

I was determined to make a good showing for the club. I like to look nice when I play, that way if I score poorly my opponents will say, "His game was terrible, but he looked good on the course." Vain maybe, but I see it as a mental prep to look the part and later, to play the part. With a foreboding thought that I was going to somehow screw up my chances in the event, I stroked a few seven irons and slyly looked around to see if anyone watched. They could care less!

My challenge was set. I practiced hard in and around Fresno, and had just played, shooting/winning the low gross with the Christian Golf Club at River Island, shooting a 76. Nerves, yep, I had them bad. Oh baby, I was afraid I would blank out when they called my name at the first tee! I had way too many people looking way too close at me as I stepped up to the tee with the starter naming the Christian Golf Club.

I, initially, stood behind the starter's tent on the hill above the number 1 tee. I asked the Lord for understanding and calm before I stepped onto the tee. While I felt better, the butterflies still did laps in my gut.

I told myself prior to getting to Poppy that I would approach the course the way that made the most sense to me. I read a quote from my golf desk calendar, of all the places, that said aim for the center of the greens and the cups will come to you. Greens! I just wanted to get off the first tee cleanly.

I was in the second to last group of my flight to tee off. As I stood on the hill watching the other groups tee off, I was pleasantly surprised to see that I wasn't playing Fred Couples and Tiger Woods today. My nerves were not the only ones twitching this morning. You know the shots...topped twenty feet, a curly slice in the trees, a low buzzing hook to the heavy rough. Understanding was coming my way!

While I initially felt alone at the course, my God put a hand on my shoulder and said, "Let's go."

Down and through, down and through...the thoughts repeated in my head. I took a deep breath and pulled the proverbial trigger on my 3 wood. The ball whistling from the tee climbed high into the morning sky over number one. It settled in the far corner of the dogleg, three feet into the wet rough. I remembered my qualifying round in which I sent my approach to number one over the back right corner of the green and the sickly-sweet voice of the marshal saying, "Remember you're going down hill." I pulled one club less, lined up, and stroked the ball to eight feet behind the flag and watched in amazement as the ball backed down the hill to a point one foot from the hole. I looked up, said "Thanks" and listened to my playing partners hoot and whistle. I used that birdie to go on to play even par at Poppy Hills. I still feel blessed and amazed by the whole event. Thus began one of the most gratifying and exhausting competitions I have ever played. The second day's play was even more electric than the first.

The second day of play, I awoke around 5:00 A.M. to the sounds of my hotel neighbors slamming the front door of their room as they arrived back from a night of mondo partying, either that or a late/early nights drive to the coast. I showered and while lathering talked to the Lord about how I had gotten to that point in the tournament. I wanted to brag and say, "Yah, it was all me, look at me now, I did this," but we all know how the Lord whispers in our ear and says, "Yah, right, try not to trip over your two feet today Mr. Wonderful." We want to run on our own, but would be much better to walk in His grace.

Breakfast at Denny's was quiet and directed by my thoughts to eat balanced and to include enough carbs for a strong start at the course. The waitress asked me if I was playing today and I almost told her that I was a leader in a tournament, but I was afraid she would think I was shooting my mouth off and I didn't want to have a weird situation like that before I hit the course. I had enough "Thoughts" in my head to keep me gearing that morning.

The course was shrouded in a mist as I pulled up to the pro-shop. As with the first day, people were milling around try to look like they didn't care, but I knew better. They were thinking, "Stay cool and look like you know what you're doing." "Nerves" and "Know-it-alls," that's what and who I saw walking all around me as I climbed from my car.

I went up onto the range and grabbed a bucket of balls with which to warm up. I walked to the mats and, initially, found them full of Davis Love and Ernie Els wannabes. They all looked pretty good, but if you look close you see the flaws and the kinks in their games. They still looked like they could drive tacks at 200 yards though!

Waiting for an empty spot, I watched a lone woman, in that sea of men, wonderfully hit the remainder of her bucket into the range. Smooth, calculated, and graceful, she stroked her shots as well as, or even better than, a few of the men out there. I was allowed for a moment to step out of my internal stressing torment to watch a gal golfer concentrate on bettering herself at the game that we all seek to acquire perfection in. I figured she wasn't playing in the tournament because she wore sweat clothes instead of a golf outfit. She stood her ground and took care of her business. That "Disconnect" was what the Lord knew I needed to get going that morning.

I stepped into an empty spot and proceeded to hit my bucket of straight, hooked, sliced, cut, faded, pulled, and pushed shots out onto the range. While going through my routine, I heard a player come up and talk to the golfer hitting balls behind me. The two exchanged pleasantries and the hitter moved into the topic of who is this "Horg" guy on the leader board. The visitor, trying to be quiet, but failing to do so, whispered, "He's right there." I could feel the stares at my back as I hit the club in my hands. The hitter, who I discovered to be the biggest headache of my day, **Mike Meyers** (No, not the comic, I wish!), stated out loud, "That looks like a pretty public swing to me!"

Initially, I wanted to turn and ask him what he meant by that, but all my days of high school and college golf told me that this was a head game in the making. I had to settle for calling him a "DINK" (in my head) and grabbing my wedge to hit a few short shots. The practice putting green was a wonder to behold. Twenty guys doing a never ending dance around eight target cups, each player trying to hone in his own personal game. The surface was fast, but true. If your aim was good, a firm stroke put you at the bottom of the cup. Trust on Poppy's greens is usually in lean supply, since wayward aim could put you in another zip code for your come back putt. Trust, what a word! All I could do was TRUST that the Lord heard my cries for steady nerves while over the ball.

As a leader, I was rewarded with watching all of the other players in my flight tee off before my group. I think I saw two out of the twenty players hit their shots. My thoughts were gearing towards what a good shot looked and sounded like. Concentrate on the good. Move smoothly into the next shot, no forcing the swing. Did you use the restroom? "Where are you from Horg?" Those were the words that brought me back. The starter was making conversation with me and I stared a moment. I explained to him, "Fresno, actually below town, Easton." Those words hadn't been gone from my lips three seconds when, Mr. Public Swing pipes up that, "Fresno sucks as a place to live!" Once again I wanted to put a finger in his face (or eye), but instead chose to explain that most people that say that don't realize a good thing that Fresno can be with its central location from the mountains, the coast, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. He stated that he lived in Fresno for awhile, but now lived in Sac-of-tomatoes, I mean Sacramento. Sorry, I'm a bit biased. I asked him, "If there was a lot of hustle and bustle in the state capital?" He declared, "No," but I bet there really was a lot and that earned me a long quiet stare.

Amongst our group, the starter exchanged our score cards so as to help along an honest game. Guess who got to carry my card! I would learn to love that fact. The Lord was watching the whole verbal events of the morning unwind and, "Wow!" does He have a great sense of humor. I didn't see it at that moment, but later on in the day I would come to recognize it for all its worth. But to experience it, there was a price I had to pay and I don't know if I could afford it again.

As tournament leader, I had the honor of going off first in my group. My 3 wood sat comfortably in my hands as I addressed the ball. My flight was straight and true down the middle of the fairway. I stepped back and watched my verbal playing partner feed his ball to the trees on the right of number one. Yah that hurt. Not!

My ball was once again at the far edge of the fairway, only today I had a tree presenting me a few of its limbs to play with in my ball flight. I hooped an 8 iron and hit my ball to the green. I came over the ball a little and my ball was moving to the left of the green. My playing partners, who had now joined me in the fairway, watched my shot land on the hill, front left of the green, and kick out right onto the green and settle about 8 feet above the cup. I said, "Yah," and Mike grumbled a colorful adjective. I read that putt from both sides and stroked it into the hole for a birdie on number 1. The par three number 2 has a ravine to carry to a two tiered green. The pin was on the lower green and just left of center position. With honors, I stepped up and struck my 9 iron to within 3 feet of the cup. I had gone birdie, birdie on the first 2 holes, and Mike had to mark them down on the card he had to carry. SWEET!

My logic was to hit to the middle-high side of the green every time. No fancy spin, no carom, and no over thinking the shots! It was a game to be seen. My other playing partner, Hal, said it all when he exclaimed, "You're killing me Horg!" out loud across the course for all to hear. I basically played smart, safe golf. Drives in the middle, approaches on the green, and putts in the hole. I was even after 9 holes on the second day. That's 27 holes, at even par, at Poppy! Mike kept saying, "Who is this guy?" between more colorful adjectives. To tell you the truth, I didn't know me!

Number 10 is a par five with a green that is guarded in front by water. Mike and Hal were first to the tee and were talking as I arrived. The gist of it was that Mike thought I was the South end of a North bound Skunk. Hal kept neutral, and said something like, "That's not for me to decide." Did I tell you that I liked Hal? Anyhow, we step to the tee and I wanted to retie my shoes, so I waived honors and let the others hit first. Hal hit a nice shot down the left center and Mike stepped up and ripped one down the dead middle of the fairway. Hooting about his feat dejour, Mike said that he had basically created life in a bottle and fired it down number 10. Now bare with me, the wind was at my back and I was smoothing it pretty well off the tee. I stepped up to my new ball (I switched on the nines) and proceeded to uncork a high draw that, you know the feeling, really felt solid. Mike complimented my shot, but also said, "There was no way I could reach his drive." Once again, bare with me, I have been up with or past everybody on all of the prior tee shots so far. We cleared the hill in the middle of number 10 in our carts and saw a ball about 240 yards from the tee (Hal's). We then, identified Mike's ball about 290 from the tees. Mike proceeded to rant about the power of his shot to all who could hear him including the marshal on the hill-top over seeing pace of play. All the marshal did was point farther down the fairway to a lone ball sitting another 40 yards closer to the hole. You would have thought some just stole Mike's car or something. To say "Explosion" just doesn't quite cover it.

I wrote earlier of a price I had to pay with experiencing this round of golf. The toll being extracted came in the form of being called an outright cheater to all who had ears. When asked my index by Mike, I explained that I was a 6 handicap. To which he replied that I was the best **** 6 he had ever seen. I tried to explain that I could pull my cell phone out and call any of a number of my Christian golf buddies who would swear that I could be beaten like a fresh egg in the morning, but he would have none of it. (I found out later that Mike was a 4 index. If I had known that at the time, I would have probably called him the worst 4 I had ever seen! He was a lousy 4.) The words, "The NCGA is going to tear you apart," still ring in my ears. The wind, which had been quiet as can be for all of the previous holes, started coming up as we went to hit our next shots. It proceeded to dry out and manifest a course out of Poppy that I never want to play again.

My play was now quiet and prayer filled. The Lord knows I worked like a big dog to get to that point on the course and I wasn't about to give it up without a fight. I fought with my emotions, the course, my clubs, and the ball. Shoot, I didn't even like the cart I was in as play progressed. All of the work and practice I had put in at Riverbend was going to be for not. The disgust that was expressed for me by Mike in the following holes was almost too much to deal with.

I wear a W.W.J.D. bracelet on my wrist and all the time I played on from number 10, I would rub it and try to remember my Father and all He has done for me. I honestly hurt inside! All I could think was my game was unraveling faster than a ball of yarn, and oh my gosh, that all I could get strength from, was "What would my Father want me to do, what am I to do?" I called on our God and asked for anything that he saw fit to give me. He saw fit to remind me that I should have brought a caddy to help intercede for me around the course. Sorry Rick, I should have had you there with me. He also showed me that not all men are followers of Christ and that we as Christians need to be, as the Army says, all that we can be. That means, be strong, have the faith of our fathers, and KNOW that our Father is always with us and hears our cries of hope and anguish. With my Fathers smack on the back of the head, I played on through Poppy. Hole 15 at Poppy is a down hill par 3 with sand front left and right. I stepped up to the tee and proceeded to pull my tee shot towards the left hand bunker. The ball crossed the bunker and settled on the hill across from the green. The ball was on the down hill slope towards the green in fluffy shag. I proceeded to fluff the ball down into the bunker. Oh yah, the bunker on this side of the green is approximately 7 to 9 feet deep with grass walls down to the sand. "Nice shot Horg!" Mike and Hal are both on the green with their tee shots and Mike has a look on his face like the cat that has swallowed the canary. You know, the smiley smirk. I was serving up disgust after disgust to myself. My thoughts were to just splash the ball out, get my bogey, and leave this "Death-on-a-Stick" of a hole. My next shot carried 8 of the 9 feet I had to climb and carry to get to the green. I left the ball in the fluff just short of the greens skirt. Brilliance, I now lay 3! As I am clearing the bunker, I hear Mike turn to Hal and say, "He's through." I wasn't so much annoyed by his statement as I was by his look of "Ha, You're getting your come upin's!" You know that shot, we all aspire to get there, where all that you do is stand over the shot, see the line, and stroke a basic comfortable practiced swing? Well, I wiped off my sand wedge, studied the shot (Kind of lazily), settled over it, kept my hands ahead of the club, and proceeded to flop my ball out over to the cup and in for my bogey. Mike, literally, dropped his putter and called me some colorful adjectives. I didn't really hear the entire series of words, since Hal and I were too busy falling all over ourselves after that shot!

I shot 10 over on the last nine that day. I was totally exhausted and thought that I had lost the tournament. To my disbelief and relief, I found that everyone had played on a windy Poppy Hills (Duh!) and everyone's score had ballooned too. Mike pretty much shot daggers out of his eyes at me when my score was announced, but a cool thing happened after the posting quieted down.

The group that I had played with the first day had told their buddies about how I had played and they all came and searched me out. They spoke of how they had known I would be the man to beat because of my actions around the course. Sure, I played well, but they said my behavior and the support of them and their games when they were down spoke highly of the person I was inside. Interesting, I figured that I was supposed to be here to win a golf match, but I guess the Lord wants us all over for other reasons. (Duh!) I met a buddy (Timo) of Hal's (Played in the tournament too, different flight) from his home club, a Fijian group, and came to find out that Hal had spoke to him of the endeavors I had on the course that day and how they had settled out. Timo is the pastor at their church. He recognized the bracelet I wore and showed me his as he walked up to me to congratulate me. He told me how he wished more of his congregation played golf, but also that if they did, they probably would play like Hal, and beat him too.

The day was long. Shoot! The tournament was long. I can really appreciate golf professionals and how they can play 4 and 5 day tournaments, and walk too. They are professional fit athletes. If I ever get to play another tournament like that again, I will take a caddy, and continue to wear the armor of God on the course.

Bill Horg