

# The Observer

## Teen spirit

Doctors thought MacKinzie Kline would die of a heart defect before she was five. Now the 15-year-old, who breathes oxygen from a tube while on the course, is one of America's outstanding young golfers and a crusading fundraiser for medical research. Gaby Wood in New Jersey meets the teenage phenomenon and her family

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When MacKinzie Kline was born on 30 March 1992, her parents were more than ready for her. After 10 years of marriage and 12 hours of labour, they couldn't wait to hold their first child in their arms. But as it turned out, theirs weren't the arms she came into. 'She was blue,' John Kline remembers over lunch at a golf course in New Jersey where his daughter, now 15, is swinging clubs for American TV cameras and busily defying all medical expectations. 'Her lips were blue, her fingers were blue, and she didn't cry.' They had friends with them in the delivery room in San Diego, California; they were all expecting to celebrate. After a while, they turned to each other and said: 'Where's the baby?' Doctors had whisked her away and, as Elizabeth Kline now recalls, 'they never brought her back. There was no baby.'

'I went to find out what had happened,' John says. 'I saw the delivery nurse in the corridor. She looked me right in the eye, and when I got within hearing distance, she said, "Mr. Kline? We have a problem. Follow me."'

Within 24 hours the Klins discovered that Mac, as she is known, had been born with a rare congenital heart defect referred to by doctors as 'functional single ventricle'. Essentially, she was missing one of the four chambers of the heart, and the blood vessels were reversed, so that there was no pump to take oxygen to her lungs. Without surgery, they were told, she would die; with it, she might live until the age of five. But at birth, her heart was too small for the operation required, so she was kept in intensive care for eight weeks. Dr John Lamberti, now director of paediatric cardiac surgery at Rady Children's Hospital in San Diego, performed the microsurgery, which was so uncommon, and such a success, that it was reported in the local newspaper. 'A news article came out,' John Kline says, 'about how Dr Lamberti had done cutting edge surgery on...'

Without warning, he begins to weep at the memory and covers his face with his hands. It's a few minutes before he can finish the sentence. His voice wavers as he goes on: '...on a walnut-sized heart... And, you know,' he adds, recovering, 'she came through it great. People ask me what's in store for Mac. Well, surgeons worldwide since 1992 have been looking at her as "what can be done". She is the bar. She's rewriting the book. And the fact that she chose to do what she's doing today...'

MacKinzie's father is not the only one to shake his head in astonishment at his daughter's unexpected and determined choice of career. For someone who lives with 80 per cent of the average person's oxygen and has no aerobic capacity at all, a life in sport would not seem to be the obvious choice. But Mac has been a golf fanatic ever since she was first introduced to the game at the age of five, by when, according to her original prognosis, she should theoretically have died. She has given herself over to it with a dedication that only someone with a hard-won sense of the purpose-driven life could muster.

Last year, Mac was ranked the number-one 14-year-old golfer in the world. At the age of 10, she was beating girls four years older to become California junior champion, a feat she repeated the following year; at 12, she qualified for the US Women's Amateur Public Links tournament. She now competes at the country's highest under-18 level, in the USGA's Junior Girls' Championship; in three years time, she is expected to turn pro.

Every time she plays in a pro-am tournament, famous players seek her out. John Daly, whom she met three years ago, was transfixed by her performance, as was Annika Sorenstam, for so long the world's best female golfer. 'I first met Mac at a clinic we did at Lake Nona [in Florida],' recalls Sorenstam, who, along with her manager and boyfriend Mike McGee, has taken Mac under her wing. 'She is amazing, and the true definition of a grinder. Her accomplishments speak for themselves: her inspiring story, of overcoming odds and of chasing her dreams both on and off the course, is a life story in and of itself.'

Last month, Sorenstam invited Mac to play as a guest in the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) tournament of which she was the host, the Ginn Tribute in South Carolina, alongside Lorena Ochoa - the current world number one - Britain's Laura Davies and women's golf's fastest rising star, Paula Creamer. Mac was allowed to travel across the course in a motorised cart, which carried a special oxygen machine from which she breathed between strokes, making her the first disabled athlete to compete in the LPGA tour.

Naturally, disabled is not something she considers herself to be in any way. Mac wrinkles her nose at the mention of the word. 'I just need a little extra help so I can play,' she reasons, of the new rules made with her in mind. 'I could probably play walking or not using oxygen, but it would be a ton harder for me and a lot harder on my heart. Believe me, if I could walk, I'd prefer to walk! But this way I'll

be able to compete at their level,' she says, projecting into her hoped-for future as a professional golfer, 'it's not giving me an unfair advantage.'

When driving her cart, Mac looks over her shoulder as someone lifts her oxygen machine into the back, as if it's very much an afterthought. The machine, called the Eclipse and designed by SeQual Technologies in San Diego, has been on the market for only a year. It's the size of a small suitcase or large laptop and magically performs the job of several hefty oxygen canisters by producing medical-grade oxygen out of thin air. Still, neat as the Eclipse is, it's a reminder of her condition that Mac evidently feels she could mostly do without.

Mac's surgeon Dr Lamberti, who has overseen her progress since her very first operation and over several more procedures, later explains to me that the net effect of Mac's shortage of oxygenated blood is to live as if she were at high altitude all the time. 'It's the equivalent of being in Denver when she's at sea level,' he says. 'When she exercises she doesn't have the ability to do the same performance that you or I could at her age, and she doesn't have the ability to increase her heart's output - she can't pull a Lance Armstrong and train.' What happens to her, he says, is that 'she gets fatigued, and as she's got older the fatigue has come earlier. So two years ago she would start to feel tired after the 12th or 13th hole, now it hits her at the 8th or the 9th hole. That's been compounded by the fact that as she's got older the courses have got longer, and the playing conditions more rigorous. That's what led to the golf cart and the oxygen.'

It was Lamberti who suggested that Mac take up golf in the first place. Her parents had only played a few times and Lamberti, while a huge sports fan, wasn't much of a golfer, either. But Mac had tried learning the piano, which was no good because she liked to be outside; she had tried ballet, but felt too clumsy. She wanted to find a sport she could do despite the impaired capacity of her vital organs. As soon as she tried golf, she loved it, initially playing both right- and left-handed. 'It was so much fun,' she says simply, thinking back. By the age of six, John Mason, who is still her instructor, had taken her on, even though he did not usually work with children. At the age of eight, her first hole in one was caught on tape. 'You know,' her father said bemusedly to a friend at the time, 'I think there really might be something in this golf thing.'

As I venture out over the green waves of the Mountain Ridge Country Club in New Jersey, Mac is giving a TV presenter a patiently administered tutorial. Natalie Morales, the perky, super-toned front woman of NBC's breakfast-time Today Show, is swinging a golf club and her miniskirt-clad backside, histrionically hitting balls in random directions while a camera crew looks on and Mac offers calm words of encouragement. Then Mac takes a turn herself. A swift, effortless tap and the ball is sent with precise, unassuming power in the direction of a little flag. Even when she is just doing it for the camera, there is something very sleek about Mac's low-key style, and it's a sign of her preternatural confidence that

Morales, who is more than twice her age, seems like the flighty teenager to Mac's quietly steering adult.

Indeed, there are several grown men now itching to play golf with her, wealthy club members driving buggies over the course like little boys with bumper cars in their impatience to get started. One of them, Joe Bier, has known Mac since she was eight years old - he is the person responsible for her being here in New Jersey, for an event that has raised more of her contribution to the Children's Heart Foundation than any other single source. At the age of 10 Mac was officially appointed national spokesperson for the foundation she and had set an impossible-sounding goal of raising a million dollars. Bier was impressed by her selfless ambition - but first and foremost he was stunned by her golf, which he witnessed when they were introduced back in California by a mutual friend.

'I remember vividly meeting her on the range for the first time,' he tells me as we wait for the TV crew to finish. 'She was tiny. She had a TaylorMade golf bag and a driver that went up to her nose. You'd just sit there and giggle to yourself. But we ended up playing, and she shot 72 - she shot even par. And all the while, I knew nothing about her heart condition - we just wanted to play her because she was the number-one ranked player for her age, she had won the California junior amateur.'

After the game, he says, they all had lunch. 'It was a funny thing: she had some crayons and she was colouring. I remember commenting that if I'd shot 72 I'd be calling all my friends! For her it was no big deal. Then John mentioned that she was the national spokesperson for the Children's Heart Foundation. When he told me that, I asked her, "Why are you doing this?" She said, "I want to raise money to help other kids like me." So here was a kid who was eight or nine years old who wanted to help other people. She had to take multiple pills, she'd had multiple surgeries, she couldn't do different aerobic things - yet she wasn't wallowing in self-pity. I thought that was remarkable: if everybody had that attitude the world would be a much better place.'

A longtime member of the Mountain Ridge Country Club, Bier immediately thought they should run a golf tournament back at his home in New Jersey to help her raise the million dollars. 'So I said, "Mac, you keep on playing golf, we'll take care of raising the money. We'll figure it out somehow."' The day after my visit, they are due to hold their fourth annual fundraiser: Mac will do a golf clinic in the morning and several luxury prizes will be auctioned off at a \$1,500-a-head dinner in the evening. When I call later that week, it turns out that they netted \$250,000 that night, taking the total funds Mac has now raised past that \$1m target.

Mac, Bier confirms, is 'a phenom when it comes to playing'. She is now so serious about the sport that school has become a distraction, and she has abandoned regular lessons in favour of home tutoring for an hour two or three

times a week. She travels around the country playing constantly - South Carolina, New Jersey, California, Kentucky have all been stops in less than two weeks - and now that she has reached her fundraising goal she plans to do the same abroad, travelling the world playing golf and increasing awareness of her condition.

Though she was ultimately disappointed with her performance at the Ginn Tribute, she thinks it has helped her to realise what she needs to work on in the next three years before she can join the LPGA tour. In any case, her performance was overshadowed by the diva-ish behaviour of her co-contestant Michelle Wie. The 17-year-old withdrew when 14 over, after 16 holes of her first round, citing continued problems relating to a wrist broken in January. Some wondered if it was a rule that banned non-Tour members from events for a year if they score an 88 or higher, rather than further injury, that caused Wie to pronounce: 'We're not going to play any more.'

Modest as Mac is, she remains, in Annika Sorenstam's words, 'a fierce competitor and a great young talent'. Ever since she was a little girl, Joe Bier tells me, professional golfers who met her at pro-am tournaments 'would stop and watch her hit - you had this little kid, four-foot nothing with a blonde ponytail, and she was just ripping 'em. You'd think: how is this possible?' Her prodigious qualities haven't changed as she has got older. 'MacKinzie has an unbelievably technically sound golf swing,' Bier says. 'A lot of women on the LPGA tour find a way to manufacture a swing, but she has a God-given talent. If you take into account her size [Mac is 5ft 2in, and weighs just over eight stone], she might pound-for-pound hit the ball better than anybody in the world.'

One in every hundred newborns suffers from a congenital heart defect. In the United States this year alone, 40,000 children will be born with one. Elizabeth Kline remembers having an ultrasound scan late in her pregnancy with Mac, and feeling comforted to hear the technician say: 'Look, you can see all four chambers of the heart.' It was a mistake. Nowadays, she says, these things are spotted much more routinely, both in utero and immediately after birth.

Five-and-a-half years after Mac was born, the Klines had another daughter, Madison. They had misgivings, naturally, about the health of their second child, and about the dynamic between the elder child, who took up so much of the family's concern, and the younger. But they are glad they took the risk. Now Madison, a feisty nine-year-old soccer player, has set her sights on becoming Mac's manager.

Mac has lived past her initial five-year prediction by a decade, and she has chosen to do something with her life that other single-ventricle patients generally avoid. 'In many ways, she's doing quite well,' Dr Lamberti says. 'The problem is, she wants to play golf, and she wants to play golf at a competitive level. From a sports point of view, she has a great heart,' he says, this time using the word

metaphorically. 'She has excellent hand-eye coordination and motor skills, and her mental approach to the game is excellent. But she's underpowered.' He makes clear, however, that golf does not in itself pose a risk. 'We don't believe that there's any danger in her playing golf - and she'd rather play golf than do almost anything else.'

It has been reported that Mac is likely to live only to the age of 20 or 30, but Lamberti says this is not true. It's just that they have only 20 years' worth of data: the entire process is simply too new to tell. 'If you go back to 1970, patients born with this diagnosis had a very dim outlook,' he elaborates. 'But in the 20 years before Mac's birth there had been tremendous advances in how we handle these kids.' That she was fortunate enough to have been born at a time when surgeons had a far better understanding of how to treat her also means that there is no dependable way to predict the outcome. 'She is the beneficiary of a treatment protocol that at best is 17, 18 years old,' Dr Lamberti explains, 'so the fact that she's 15 means that she's one of the people we're waiting and watching to see how well they do.' Then he offers a firmer opinion. 'Here's what I think: based on the data that I have available, I know patients who are in their thirties, who are functioning, who were treated the way we treated patients 30 years ago. She's half that age, and she's ahead of where those patients were at this point, so there's reason to infer that she's going to do better when she's in her thirties.'

Eventually, Mac might be helped by a heart transplant, or by the insertion of an artificial heart of the kind that is yet to be invented. But who would pay for any of this? The Klines are a family of average means; John is an estate agent, and Elizabeth is an air stewardess. John calls Mac his 'million-dollar baby', not because of her fundraising goal, but because of the amount of money that has already been spent on her health. Once she turns 18, Mac will have to come off her parents' health-insurance policy - in a country with no state healthcare system, she could be in serious trouble. Because of her condition, John tells me, 'Mac is uninsurable'. Their one hope is that, when she turns pro, they can persuade an insurance company to sponsor her and offer her coverage as part of the deal.

As Lamberti's reference to Mac's sporting heart reveals, it is virtually impossible to think about the literal human heart without also considering its figurative incarnations. As far as John and Elizabeth are concerned, they made a pledge to each other very early on that they were not going to treat Mac any differently from the way they would treat a normal child. 'And we've done that,' John says. 'We've never limited her, we've allowed her to find her way. You're just happy with every day that she's around.'

Mac didn't even know she had a heart condition until she was eight or so. A few years ago, Marjorie McNamara, Mac's friend and former babysitter, wrote a book entitled *Mac's Secret Weapon: Tips for Junior Golfers*, partly in order to inspire other people to overcome their physical difficulties. 'Mac's life teaches by

example the fact that even though you may be born with what appears to be a handicap, there are things you can do that will fill your life with accomplishment and meaning, no matter how old you are,' wrote McNamara, who has known Mac since she was nine months old. 'Now the only handicap Mac knows is the number 1.0 handicap she reports on her golf score card.' Many of the mottos in the book, which is illustrated with golfing cartoons, offer recommendations that reflect Mac's sanguine outlook and seem to relate as much to golf as they do, metaphorically, to life in general: 'one hole at a time'; 'challenges help you improve your game'; 'mistakes happen to show off your talent'.

Lamberti thinks that for Mac to have retained her focus even into her teenage years - years when other patients with serious illnesses often rebel and refuse to take medication - makes her especially unusual, 'because really... she has to know the future is guarded'.

I ask John Kline if he thinks that having death as an unspoken but ever-present backdrop might be what gives Mac her phenomenal embrace of life. 'You know,' he says, 'if you ask her she'll say, "It doesn't matter to me. I don't care if it's 15 years or 30 years." But I really think she thinks about it. Maybe that's why she has a better perspective on where she's going, what her time frame is, and how she's going to get there - which I haven't seen in many 15-year-olds.'

Sure enough, when I put a version of this question to Mac as we sit in the club's restaurant over a golf-themed drink (named after Arnold Palmer), she says she never really thinks about it. Mac has a round, sunny face and an equally bright disposition. 'Her personality is like her golf swing,' her father had told me, 'smooth, humble, determined.' Today she is wearing yellow shorts and dangly heart-shaped earrings. Her large eyes are emphasised by an uninterrupted border of black eyeliner, and as she speaks her hand moves up to encourage her feathery blonde fringe out of the way.

'I mean, I've thought about it,' she elaborates, 'but I never really thought that I couldn't do things that a normal person can do. I didn't think the heart condition was that big a deal.' When it comes to the details of her health, her mother says, 'she only listens to half of this stuff. You know, faced with certain things, you can't listen to everything. If you do, you're going to not do well - you have to move forward and not think about that cloud over your head.'

Mac knows that she is alone among her friends in knowing what she wants to do with 'the rest of my life', as she puts it. She considers their uncertainty normal, but is happy that she is set on joining the LPGA tour, and perhaps becoming a golf coach when she retires. 'I know that's what I want to do,' she insists. 'There's not an if or a but about it.'

The more you speak to her, the clearer it becomes that she has a fervent, smiling embrace of life that few people of any age have the perspective to attain, and

that must surely, when it comes to golf, give her a mental edge. Eventually, she does reflect that her optimism comes from her acquaintance with the doomful alternative. 'I mean, you have to have fun in your life,' she says, 'Definitely having surgeries and meeting other kids and reading emails from kids and parents makes you just think, "There's no reason for me to be upset about life, or even upset about one day, because it could be a ton worse."'

Last year, Mac suffered a serious setback. If she preferred not to know too much about her condition, as of last summer she could hardly avoid it. She started to feel dizzy and nauseous and short of breath. She was advised to undergo a heart catheterisation, but Mac refused to pull out of the golf tournaments for which she had prepared so hard. Her parents said it was her decision. So she played the tournaments and returned for the catheterisation, whereupon her doctors found that she had a new hole in her heart and a blood clot. They repaired the hole, and told her that because of the blood clot she would no longer be able to go surfing, or to ride on rollercoasters. The barring of these activities, which may not seem like things someone with a heart condition would naturally choose to do in any case, were for Mac troubling intimations of mortality. When I ask her what are the greatest challenges she has faced in her life, she immediately replies that this was it. 'I love rollercoasters,' she says, 'and now I can't go to the Del Mar fair in San Diego with my friends.'

'She's not happy about it,' says her mother, 'but I told her, "You could really die, Mac. You really could." It's just the way it is. She can't take that chance.'

Other than the proviso about rollercoasters, Mac is mostly able to live without talking about - or, as she says, even thinking about - her health. In her bedroom at home, all the walls are covered in golf memorabilia - photos of herself with the women she admires on the LPGA tour, trophies. Her one concession to making her room 'not too golfy' is not to have a golf-themed bedspread.

Most of Mac's days are dedicated to practice. (She keeps up with her old friends via a rigorous regime of text-messaging.) Often she will go to the course with her best friend Alice, who only took up the sport a couple of years ago but is hoping to earn a golf scholarship to university. Sometimes, Alice will drive the long way round so they can listen to more music in the car - whether it's Avril Lavigne or Eminem. They chat about boys (Mac hasn't had a boyfriend yet - she is too focused on golf - but she has noticed that there have been a few cute guys at some of the tournaments) or movies (her favourite is *Caddy Shack*, the cult golfing comedy starring Bill Murray).

I suggest to Mac that her life would itself make a good film, and ask who she thinks should play her. She looks shocked at the idea, proclaiming it 'weird' and then 'cool', and remains stumped for a star (she does, however, express admiration for Lindsay Lohan's early work). When I speak to her family less than

a week later, they are all in Hollywood, about to go into a meeting with Paramount Pictures. So there may yet be a Hollywood ending.

As we leave the restaurant at the Mountain Ridge Country Club, a member approaches and says he has put some of Mac's stray possessions in her cart - a couple of head covers, a glove, 'and a few other things you left a trail for'. I smile at the Hansel and Gretel analogy and the man smiles back with a rueful sort of sympathy. 'She's a great kid,' he says. 'So great that a lot of people forget she is just a kid.'

· You can follow MacKinzie Kline's progress at [MackKline.com](http://MackKline.com)