

Last year, Matt Henkel watched the U.S. Open on TV from a hospital bed while undergoing presurgery tests for a brain tumor. This year, Henkel not only watched the U.S. Open live from Bethpage Black Golf Course, he worked on the grounds crew as a volunteer.

What a difference a year makes. And in this case, thankfully, that year has been nothing but good news for Henkel, the assistant golf course superintendent at PrairieView Golf Club in Byron, Ill., and one of the nicest guys you'll ever meet.

Henkel was my roommate at the Farmingdale State College dormitory, where the U.S. Open volunteers stayed during the tournament. I was on assignment and also stayed at the dorm. About five minutes after meeting Henkel, I was whining about forgetting a blanket for my tiny bed. But Henkel had two blankets, and didn't think twice about offering me one.

We were up the next morning (the middle of the night in my book) at 3 a.m. to get to work. I spoke with Henkel more as the day went on and got to know him better — 30 years old, married to Cammie, two young children, from a small town, polite, humble. And a cancer survivor. When Henkel told me the latter, I was taken by surprise considering his youth. But that's the thing about cancer — it doesn't care how old you are.

Last summer, 10 in the morning would come at work, and Henkel would be exhausted. Then there were the headaches and neck pain. After two weeks of this, Henkel headed to the doctor, who told him he was stressed. The symptoms continued and Henkel checked into the local hospital's emergency room. When the ER doc told him he was OK, Henkel wanted factual information to be sure. So he underwent a CAT scan, which revealed a slow-growing brain tumor.

Henkel was 29, in his prime physically and with dreams of living out his career as a superintendent, not to mention as a father and a husband. He was stunned.

Fortunately, Henkel was able to have surgery and had the tumor removed last August at Uni-

One of the Best U.S. Open Stories

BY LARRY AYLWARD



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versity of Wisconsin Hospital, Madison. While he received a solid prognosis, Henkel took off several weeks from work.

Back to the blanket Henkel gave me. I have a feeling plenty of others have been on the receiving end of his generosity because a lot of people wanted to help him. Henkel's friends organized a benefit and raised thousands of dollars to help him pay the medical bills. Henkel also received a generous donation from the Wee One Foundation, a charitable organization founded on behalf of Wayne Otto, the popular Wisconsin superintendent who died of cancer in 2004. In addition, Henkel's co-workers donated their sick time so Henkel could get paid for the time he had to take off. They donated enough time that Henkel could've taken off a year.

Henkel began the new year feeling strong and ready for the 10-hour (or longer) workdays that accompany the golf season. And then he received the invite to volunteer on the grounds crew at Bethpage, which he called an honor. Henkel busted his tail for a week on little sleep and loved every minute of it.

A year ago, when he watched the U.S. Open from a hospital bed, Henkel never dreamed he'd be at the tournament a year later—and in the middle of the action, at that. Back then, Henkel just wanted to be alive come June 2009.

During the tournament, much was made of Phil Mickelson trying to win the trophy for his wife, Amy, who had been diagnosed with breast cancer only weeks before. It was a cool story and everybody was pulling for Phil.

Nothing was made in the media about the lesser-known Henkel and his plight. But in my book, and to those who knew of it, it was one of the best stories at this year's U.S. Open.

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