

# Golfers feel the pain of Woods' win

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TRIBUNE REPORTERS

Like Tiger Woods, who won the U.S. Open on Monday while battling pain from knee surgery, Pam Fritzsché is not about to let some discomfort keep her from the game she loves.

Fritzsché, a marathon runner, said she plays golf through soreness that affects her left knee, both elbows, her right toe and the left wrist she broke in a fall last winter.

“He at some point just said, ‘Screw the pain,’ ” Fritzsché, 55, said as she worked on her short golf game in Des Plaines on Monday afternoon. “With his mental powers, he can just block it out.”

The drama of the U.S. Open had fans across the country glued to TVs on Monday, but golfers who have struggled with injuries watched Woods’ show of guts with particular

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interest. For them, Woods' triumph over his sore left knee offered a rare moment of identification with the top athlete in the game.

Golf is about the furthest thing imaginable from a dangerous contact sport, yet even for amateurs, the pastime can exacerbate old injuries or exact a physical toll.

Moreover, many aficionados prize the game because it allows them to keep playing into old age, creating a legion of golfers who soldier on despite achy knees and backs.

An amateur golfer who has endured three knee surgeries, Rick Nichols of Western Springs followed the U.S. Open with a mixture of admiration and *déjà vu*.

Nichols, 55, had his latest golf-related knee operation in January; Woods underwent a similar procedure to clean out damaged cartilage in April. Like Woods, Nichols has struggled with the sport's gradual wear and tear, caused by decades of repetitive swings and torso twists.

"For me it's like the ultimate test," said Nichols, an insurance company employee who plays up to 75 times a year. "I'm amazed that [Woods] didn't play for weeks then comes out and wins the U.S. Open."

Golf's physical demands are far greater for pros than for the average weekend warrior, but all face versions of the same ailments: lower back pain, knee injuries, elbow fatigue and the occasional sprain from tripping into a sand trap or carrying a heavy club bag.

Many injuries that ordinary golf-



Tribune photo by Charles Cherney

**Jerry Oswald, 70, of Evanston takes swings at the Des Plaines Park District Golf Center. Oswald's arthritic knee affects his game, he says.**

ers suffer can be solved with a more efficient swing or exercises that strengthen key muscles in the back, legs or abdominal muscles. Physical therapists said sometimes the answer is for golfers to work on pivoting with the hips or ankles rather than the knees—which may not be an option for as forceful a player as Woods.

"He asks his body to do things that even the average tour player doesn't do," said Aaron Stoll, a physical therapist at a Chicago branch of the AthletiCo sports medicine clinic.

Many golfers said Woods has changed the sport's image, highlighting its physical demands.

Gone are the days when rotund competitors such as Craig Stadler, known affectionately as "The Walrus," could dominate.

"It's well known on the tour that [Woods] has taken conditioning and workouts to a different level," said Dr. Jason Koh, an orthopedic surgeon at Northwestern Memorial Hospital who has served as an on-call physician for the Western Open.

Sometimes players change their swings to compensate for an injury, which leads to still more problems. That was a concern for Dr. Charles Bush-Joseph, head team physician for the Chicago White Sox and a recreational golfer who had to relearn

his swing after having ligament surgery in both knees.

"What happens is that guys really have to lighten up their swing," Bush-Joseph said. "They do everything they can to avoid torque going through the knee, so they'll alter their swing. That's where you get the secondary injuries."

Physical preparation is one of the best ways to prevent golf injuries, experts said. John Christiansen, a therapist with Advanced Rehabilitation Clinics in Westmont and Lisle, said he often works on exercises and stretches that ensure his patients have enough hip flexibility to execute an efficient swing.

But many golfers said their biggest priority is just feeling good enough to have fun playing the game.

That's the goal for Jim Fay, 75, who watched the Open while waiting to play nine holes at Arlington Lakes Golf Club. The retired school superintendent from Arlington Heights had both of his knees replaced after decades of trouble stemming from childhood basketball injuries.

But as he observed Woods' vicious, whirlwind drives on a clubhouse TV, Fay worried that the young star could pay a price someday for his play.

"The way he swings so hard, I hope he doesn't injure himself permanently," said Fay. "I think he couldn't play nearly as well if he had to have replacements."

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