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Inkel-Pongracz weathers severe personal storm

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Abby Vorreyer admits it will be a bit unusual today when she tees it up with her University of Illinois Springfield coach, Nichole Inkel-Pongracz, in the opening round of the Women's City Golf Tournament at Lincoln Greens.

But if one of Vorreyer's shots goes awry, she'll probably get some encouragement from Inkel-Pongracz.

"Her biggest thing is, even when everything's going wrong, just be positive in the moment and deal with the next shot," Vorreyer said of Inkel-Pongracz. "That's the biggest thing she tries to teach us."

If Inkel-Pongracz didn't already use that approach to golf — and life — before this year, it was reinforced this past spring.

Already having survived a serious auto accident in 1992 and cervical cancer a little more than a decade ago, the UIS coach went through an emotional month during which she said goodbye to her biggest fan and came very close to losing another one.

"If there's anything I learned from that experience, it's that it's not what happens in your life, it's how you deal with it," said Inkel-Pongracz, whose father, H. Albert "Al" Inkel, died on April 3 in Naples, Fla.

At the same time, Nichole's mother, Becky Inkel, was gravely ill in Florida, where Nichole originally had brought her UIS team to play and practice. But Becky rallied and — while she's not ready to play in the Women's City this weekend — might stop by Lincoln Greens today or Bunn Golf Course on Sunday.

"You know, I'm 40 now," Nichole said. "And my dad still came out to the City Tournament every year and followed me, even last year. My mom stopped coming quite a few years ago because she'd get nervous.

"But she said the other day, 'I'll have to take your dad's spot.' I don't know if she'll come out this weekend; it's going to be pretty hot. If she does come out, that would be emotional."

Nichole, originally a standout at Springfield High, said she first entered the Women's City at the urging of her mother. Nichole remembered when, as a 13-year-old, she played in the tourney while her father caddied for her.

"He was 42, and that's when he had his first heart attack," said Nichole, who's won four city titles and finished sixth last year. "It actually happened on the course, but he didn't say anything. We finished, and I found out later.

"He kept having heart problems, but from age 42 to 69, he survived because he had the most positive outlook on life. There wasn't anything so terrible that he couldn't get past it. He never felt sorry for himself, and he adored his family.

"We came first, even when he wasn't feeling well."

Long stay in Florida

After coaching the girls golf team at Chatham Glenwood High School, Inkel was hired to coach the women's squad at UIS. She brought her team to Florida in mid-March, when Al and Becky were still in their annual winter stay in the Sunshine State.

Nichole and the team would stay in Al and Becky's condominium. When they arrived, Nichole learned that Al was in the hospital because of heart problems. But he was discharged soon after.

"My dad came home, and was up one morning, cooking breakfast for everybody," she said. "But Mom said she hadn't been feeling well. She wouldn't eat or drink, and she was staying in bed.

"Even my team was worried. Was it the flu, or was she just tired or stressed? I decided to stay; I put the girls on a plane (back to Illinois) on a Thursday, and I was going to fly back on that Sunday."

But a series of occurrences kept Nichole in Florida. It was finally learned that Becky — who'd been hospitalized — had a perforated colon. Even after undergoing emergency surgery, she was in intensive care for more than two weeks.

"My dad was out of the hospital then, but they told him, 'You're not ready to be able to take care of your wife when she comes home,'" Nichole said. "He was mortified by the idea he couldn't take care of her."

Back and forth

Al was hospitalized again for a short time, although he was at a facility about a 35-minute drive from where Becky was.

"I was at the hospital with mom, and a friend (of the Inkel's) called and said dad had to go to the hospital," Nichole said. "They said he probably had a reaction to some medicine he was on.

"But it was crazy for a while there, going back and forth between the two hospitals."
While she was still in Florida, Nichole said she stayed in contact with her golfers and the athletic staff at UIS.

"I needed to get back; we were still in season," she said. "But the UIS people were phenomenal with their support. I tried to tell the girls what they needed to do.

"Some of them would email me, saying 'This is my swing; what am I doing wrong?' "
Easter weekend was approaching, and Nichole's sister, Lori, was coming down from Virginia on Easter morning to spend the holiday with their parents. So Nichole was scheduled for a flight back to Illinois the Saturday afternoon before Easter.

"I went to see mom one more time," Nichole said. "Then when I was getting ready to leave for the airport, dad hugged me before I got in the cab. We both lost it. I was crying the whole way to the airport.

"The poor driver said at one point, 'Do you want me to pull over? What can I do? We can go back.' I said, 'No, it's OK. I'll be fine.' "

Presence still felt

Not long after she got back home that night, Nichole received a phone call from a friend with whom Al was staying after Nichole left that day. Al had died after suffering a massive heart attack.

"He said, 'Are you sitting down?' and I just knew it wasn't mom," Nichole said of the late-night call. "I thought, 'Why did you let me leave? Maybe I could've done something.' You always think that way."

Nichole and her husband, Bill, drove to St. Louis early Easter morning so Nichole could get yet another flight to Florida. Lori also was in Florida by then, and they went to the hospital to see Becky and ponder how to break the news to her.

But on a somber Easter morning, there was uplifting news waiting at the hospital.

"Mom had been in ICU for two and a half weeks," Nichole said. "I walked in and said, 'Where's my mom?' She wasn't in her room.

"The nurse said, 'The most amazing thing happened. About midnight, her vitals went way up, and everything seemed to be clicking. So we moved her out of ICU.'

"And I thought, 'You know, that has to be my dad.' It was like, he knew he couldn't take care of mom while he was here, so . . . you have no idea what it was like when they told us that."

Becky eventually was flown back home, and once she'd recovered sufficiently, a memorial service was held for Al at Illini Country Club on May 28.

A month and a half later, 11-year-old Joelle — the youngest of Nichole's three children — won the sj-r.com Drysdale Tournament championship at Bergen. She was using Al's clubs, which she has used most of the summer.

"It's still hard for my mom, because her life's totally changed," Nichole said. "She's had physical changes after what she went through; she can't eat certain things. And now her husband's gone.

"But God bless her, she's still doing better than I expected. She's getting there."

Nichole said she's convinced her father will be there in spirit today and Sunday, noting, "I'll hit some bad shot and he'll be saying, 'Now why did you do that?'"

"But with everything that's happened, you try to remember, 'It might be awful now, but the only way to make it worse is dwelling on it.' That's the way golf is. You're going to have bad shots and bad days.

"It happens. You just move on."

Dave Kane can be reached at 788-1544.

Sorenstam remembers 'Chef Albert' Inkel

LPGA Hall of Famer Annika Sorenstam played in the State Farm Classic in Springfield just a few times. But when the Swedish star did come here, the Inkels were always her hosts.

Sorenstam first stayed with Al and Becky Inkel when she was a tour rookie in 1994. But she also stayed with them in subsequent years.

Now retired and the mother of a young daughter, Sorenstam was still on Nichole Inkel-Pongracz's e-mail list when Nichole informed family friends that Al had died on April 3.

"She called me when I was at the hospital seeing mom," Nichole said of Sorenstam. "We talked for a while. It was amazing. She told me things about my dad that I didn't even know.

"My dad was such a good cook. Annika called him, 'Chef Albert.' He'd make her amazing meals. We'd joke about it. The year she won (2006 at The Rail), we're like, 'Gee, what did he feed you? We need him to fix us the same thing!'"

Nichole said her father would send Sorenstam congratulatory notes whenever she picked up a victory on the LPGA Tour.

"She told me my dad was an amazing man," Nichole said of the phone conversation, "and I needed to make sure everything was OK with my mom. My dad really enjoyed watching her play and being part of that."

Women's City Golf champions

Here's a list of Women's City Golf Tournament champions. Prior to 1988, tournament was sponsored by the Springfield Women's Association of Golf and had team competition

- 2009 — Hannah Bachman
- 2008 — Hannah Bachman
- 2007 — Michelle Anderson
- 2006 — Josie Lowder
- 2005 — Josie Lowder
- 2004 — Josie Lowder
- 2003 — Nichole Inkel Bennett
- 2002 — Nichole Inkel Bennett
- 2001 — Laura Patrick
- 2000 — Jennifer Shutt
- 1999 — Laura Patrick
- 1998 — Jamie Smith
- 1997 — Laura Patrick
- 1996 — Sheila Stults
- 1995 — Myona Thoron
- 1994 — Laura Patrick
- 1993 — Heather Buraski
- 1992 — Nichole Inkel
- 1991 — Nichole Williams
- 1990 — Mindy Bono
- 1989 — Mindy Bono
- 1988 — Mindy Bono
- 1987 — Tracy Tate
- 1986 — Tracy Tate
- 1985 — Tracy Tate
- 1984 — Molly Cody
- 1983 — Tracy Tate
- 1982 — Tracy Tate
- 1981 — Tracy Tate
- 1980 — Tracy Tate
- 1979 — Jane Murphy
- 1978 — Barb Turnbull
- 1977 — Sarah LeVeque
- 1976 — Sarah LeVeque
- 1975 — Judy Meador
- 1974 — Sarah LeVeque
- 1973 — Kate McNamara
- 1972 — Kate O'Keefe
- 1971 — Rosie Hagan
- 1970 — Bernadette Nolan
- 1969 — Judy Meador
- 1968 — Judy Meador
- 1967 — Kate O'Keefe
- 1966 — Judy Meador
- 1965 — Judy Meador
- 1964 — Judy Meador
- 1963 — Judy Meador
- 1962 — Judy Meador
- 1961 — Judy Meador
- 1960 — Julia Rowland
- 1959 — Judy McCarty
- 1958 — Judy McCarty
- 1957 — Judy Allan
- 1956 — Dolores Schofield
- 1955 — Dolores Schofield
- 1954 — Dolores Lehr
- 1953 — No individual winner
- 1952 — No tourney
- 1951 — Marjorie Huegel

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