

Greg Kepic's Inspirational Journey Now Includes A Golf State Title For Hunterdon Central



Hunterdon Central golf coach Chris Gacos had a tough decision to make in advance of his team's appearance at the NJSIAA Tournament of Champions on May 17.

The team had a roster full of capable players, as evidenced by its 12-0 record in dual matches and strong showings in other events throughout the season, including championships in the Hunterdon County and Hunterdon/Warren/Sussex tournaments, as well as its own Red Devil Tournament. It also finished second to Westfield in the Group 4 sectional tournament to earn its spot in the state finals.

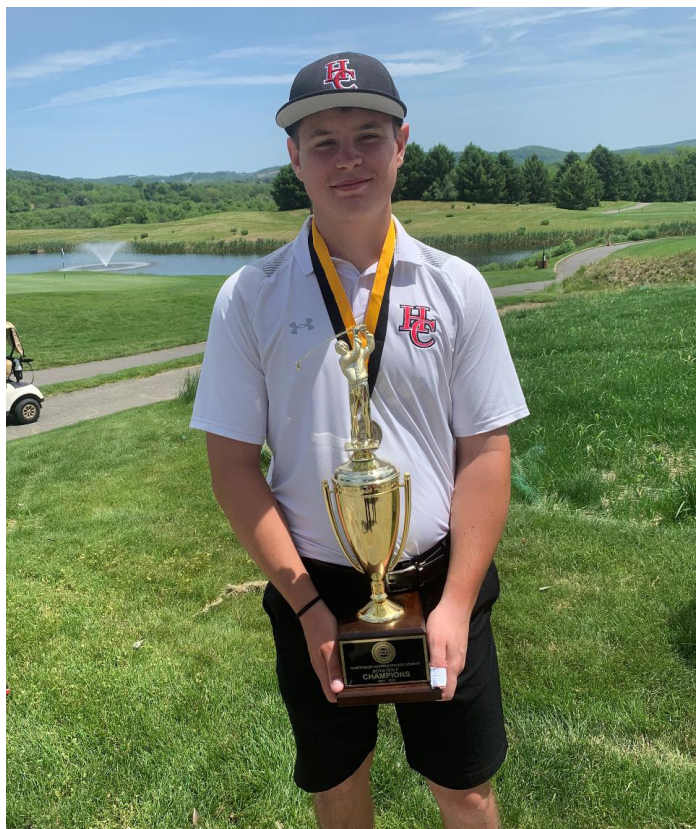
While five golfers compete for a team in the sectionals, with the four best scores counting, only four play in the state group tournament, which also serves as the Tournament of Champions. And every score counts toward the team total at an event where one stroke can make a very big difference in the order of finish.

It was a hard decision for sure, but with golfers like Greg Kepic and Zachery Fisher on his roster, it was also an easy one.

Kepic was a senior with an incredible backstory, one that Gacos didn't even know the full extent of until the season was over. He was also playing better as the season progressed.

Fisher was a sophomore who had a better scoring average than Kepic, but knew that his friend was playing well, was older, and had endured a lot throughout his life. He admirably felt that Greg deserved a chance to compete in the fourth spot that day at Hawk Point Golf Club in Washington.

"Zachery Fisher had a better scoring season," Gacos said. "But he made my decision easier. Greg was going into the state finals for all the right reasons.



Greg is a fighter, and I knew that I had a warrior going into battle for a championship.”

The coach’s knowledge of Greg centered around a few things. He knew that he deeply loved golf and that he came from a solid family, since his brother, Joseph, played four years for Hunterdon Central before graduating in 2021, and that his parents Yarka and Joe, were supportive of their boys and the entire program. He also knew that Greg had dealt with some sort of physical problem, because he walked with a limp and had an unorthodox swing.

He also knew that Greg was a player who was cut as a freshman and lost his sophomore season due to the Covid-caused cancellation of the campaign. He made the team as a junior and earned one of the starting spots this year, with strong rounds to his credit. As a golfer, he had paid his dues.

Fisher was aware of the same things as his coach.

“I admire Greg a lot,” Zachery said. “I’ve known him for a few years since we are both members at Copper Hill Country Club. Greg and I play together and bounce ideas off each other a lot. Greg is a really good guy and it was pretty cool to watch him have the season that he had. I really admire how he has bounced back from a lot of challenges that he has had over the years, and I think it really shows that you can do anything you set your mind to do. We have a really great team at Hunterdon Central, and the team chemistry that we have is just as awesome. All of us are super close and we all make each other better as a team.”



While Gacos knew about the physical challenges, he didn’t know the extent until Greg’s senior season was complete. The reason is a very impressive one.

“What I didn’t know was his early life background,” he said. “His parents never wanted me to know and for him to be treated special.”

Greg Kepic was born in July of 2004, three months premature. He was blind, had a hole in his heart and was unable to breathe and eat on his own. Then, he suffered a massive brain bleed.

“On a scale of 1 to 4, four being the worst, he had a grade four on one side and a grade three on the other side of the brain,” his mother said. “He was doing really poorly, and we were put in front of the decision to pull the plug. We were told by the doctors if he survived, and chances were slim, he would be most likely quadriplegic, and hemiplegic at best. He was given transfusions, the bleed was bad and we could go for the DNR. Well, he is a fighter and we didn’t pull the plug. He was going home at 4 pounds at three months with a million monitors and lines. We were exercising with him every day, and he was fighting and fighting. I think we all could have earned a doctor’s degree by the time he turned two.”

All the while, his fighting spirit resulted in steady improvements.

“Greg got his eyesight at six months and he was moving the right side of his body,” his mom said. “More therapies and his left side started responding. He was walking before his second birthday and the hole in his heart closed on its own.”

Years later, the fighting spirit has made him into a very special teenager, one who’ll attend and play golf at William Paterson in the fall.

“He sure has no problem eating or breathing,” his mom said. “He is a fighter. His left calf is half the size as his right, he limps, his swing is awkward and he carries his left arm funny. But he found his way. Everything is physically harder for him to do because he is not fully controlling his left side, but he is doing it.”

What helped Greg growing up was that he was far from alone. Aside from his mom and dad, he was also following in the steps of his brother. That closeness is what drew him to golf, and his incredible devotion to the game.

He had played golf casually growing up, along with his family. And since his brother played soccer, so did Greg.

“My brother played soccer, was pretty good, and he didn’t make the freshman team,” Greg said. “So I figured I wasn’t as good a soccer player as he was, and he didn’t make the team, so I might as well try out for golf.”

And once Greg didn’t make the golf team as a freshman, he not-so-surprisingly didn’t give up. The born fighter immersed himself in the game to get better.

“I was mad at myself,” Greg said. “I was frustrated.”

“He didn’t put any effort into making the team,” his father said. “He just thought I can hit the ball, I’m going to try out and I’m going to make it. And that did not happen, so it was eye-opening for him. So he realized that if he was going to make the team, he was going to have to put an effort into it.”

Thereafter, Greg was asking for rides to the local driving range all the time, no matter the weather or temperature. His parents gladly obliged, and his game also began to noticeably improve.

But his sophomore season never happened, because of the Covid shutdown. The shutdowns even extended to the driving range, so Greg and his brother created an improvised course behind their Ringoes home.

As a junior in 2021, he finally made the team.

“It was a relief,” Greg said. “It was a good experience.”

It also made him play even more.



“Golf is greedy,” Gacos said. “The better you play, the better you want to become.”

But it still wasn’t all smooth sailing. What would have been a huge summer in building his game never happened. The kid who couldn’t play enough golf suffered a broken collarbone horsing around with some friends. He didn’t require surgery, but was sidelined for several months, including the all-important summer and much of the fall.

In his first tournament back during the fall, he couldn’t break 100. That resulted in more determination, and more practice.

His play this year was steady. He had several dual match scores in the 30s, highlighted by a team best 36 in a victory over Bridgewater-Raritan that the team needed to win in order to capture the Skyland Conference championship.

In the NJSIAA sectional tournament on May 9 at High Bridge Hills, Greg’s round of 82 was the fourth best of the Hunterdon Central golfers, ahead of Fisher.

For the state finals just over a week later, Zachery impressively agreed to let Greg take the fourth spot.

“It was pretty admirable as a sophomore to admit to that,” Gacos. “He stepped aside and said to let him play. And Greg had earned it because he was hot. He was a major part of our season, especially at the end.”

“It was the right decision because I hadn’t been playing my best golf and Greg is a senior and I’m only a sophomore, so it was right to give Greg that final chance to play in states,” Zachery said. “I’m glad Greg went because he was able to have that experience as a senior, I think that’s super important and very valuable.”

In the state finals, Greg shot an 85, which placed roughly middle of the pack among the entire field. It was enough for Hunterdon Central to win the Group 4 championship by two shots ahead of Westfield. The Red Devils also finished fourth in the TOC.

The most notable thing of all about that: Greg was able to achieve something that his brother and golf idol did not. He won a state championship.

And amazingly, Gacos never knew Greg’s full story until receiving a thankful email from his parents after that round.

“He went from one setback to another setback to another,” Gacos said, referring to his golf career. “And after all of those, he turned it around and did better. It’s storybook as far as I’m concerned. And then when his mother told me that 17 years ago he was fighting for his life... when I read the email I was crying.”

“I didn’t want to tell him beforehand,” Yarka Kopic said. “In order for the accomplishment to be an accomplishment, he had to accomplish it himself. We didn’t want to play the sorry card.”

Greg has a simple reason for making that so.

“I really hate getting handouts,” he said.

“It’s amazing,” his mom noted. “He’s almost done growing up because he’s going to be 18 in a few weeks, but from where it started and through all the struggle, he found his way.”

“We were happy that he was doing any sports,” his dad said. “When he was playing soccer, he was not a superstar, but he was trying to do his best. We were happy he was doing that and not sitting home and playing video games. And he’s going to be playing a college sport. How many kids can say that?”

In the end, Greg sees definite parallels between his own story and the game of golf.

“It keeps you thinking,” he said. “Going from a team sport to an individual sport was a lot better because the only thing I could rely on was myself. In golf, it’s all me, and it’s all my mistakes and what I do wrong and what I do right. It’s similar to life. You can’t have every shot go perfect. You have to take what comes at you.”

It was an incredible story capped off by a state championship finish.

“He was a great kid to represent Hunterdon Central golf,” Gacos said. “I’m going to be telling his story for a long time.”

