Playing By Heart

Ken Venturi has weathered life's adversities like a pro.

WITH AN UNWAVERING SPIRIT INFUSED IN HIM BY PARENTS FRED AND ETHYL, GOLF GREAT KEN VENTURI HAS WEATHERED LIFE'S ADVERSITIES LIKE A PRO. FROM HIS BURST ONTO THE GOLF SCENE AT 24 AT THE 1956 MASTERS, TO HIS ROLLERCOASTER CAREER AND HEALTH CHALLENGES, KEN'S HONEST AND EMOTIONAL APPROACH TO LIFE HAS HIM COMING OUT ON TOP EVERY TIME.

If you ask one of Ken Venturi's sons what he does for a living, he would say, "He's a professional comeback artist." Ken is no stranger to difficulty so when he had chest pains during the night about a year ago, he didn't think much of it. After all, he was in good shape for his age, a light eater, he exercised and he was not taking any medications.

Ken got up the next morning and had a little breakfast. He told his wife, Kathleen, that he still was not feeling well and headed back to bed. A former nurse assistant, Kathleen was concerned and called Eisenhower Medical Center.When Ken and Kathleen arrived at the hospital, Board Certified Cardiologist Eric Sontz, MD, confirmed that Ken had already had a heart attack. "Dr. Joseph Wilson came back from a medical conference to operate on me. I was so grateful," says Ken.

On December 1, 2006, Ken Venturi had a five-way bypass to open his 90 percent blocked arteries. In addition, Dr.Wilson repaired Ken's mitral valve (one of the valves of the heart that opens and closes for blood flow), which was leaking severely. "There is no history of heart disease in my family, no heart problems," says Ken. "I hit golf balls every day. I thought this couldn't happen to me."

Ken's condition is not uncommon; in fact, heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States.When blood vessels that supply the heart with oxygen and nutrients become blocked or narrowed by plaque, the risk for heart attack increases. Bypass surgery allows an increased supply of blood to the heart. Blood vessels taken from the arm, chest or leg are attached above and below the obstructed part of the coronary artery to "bypass" the blockage. A five-way bypass, like Ken's, references the number of arteries bypassed during the procedure.

Noting the severity of Venturi's heart disease JosephWilson, MD, a Board Certified Cardiothoracic Surgeon, says, "I told Ken that he may not have survived an additional five or six weeks without surgical intervention due to the magnitude of his heart attack."

After returning home from his hospital stay, Ken came down with the flu. "I started coughing and we had to wrap a towel around my chest because the force of my cough opened one of the chest tube openings," he recalls. Again, Ken was taken to Eisenhower Medical Center's Tennity Emergency Department. "They were wonderful. I will always be grateful for the excellent care they gave me."

Just one year later, Ken has been given a clean bill of health and hits golf balls daily, enjoying the desert landscape he and Kathleen love. For most people, coming back from a five-way bypass would be a once-in-a-lifetime event. For Ken Venturi, it was just another comeback. "My dad told me something once and it has always stuck with me…. He said, 'Son, there's only one thing that takes no talent. Anybody can give up.'"

The Venturi Kid, as he was known in his home town of San Francisco, has weathered more ups and downs than the golf balls he is so famous for hitting. "My dad told me something once and it has always stuck with me,"muses Ken. "He said, 'Son, there's only one thing that takes no talent. Anybody can give up.'"

When Ken was 13, a teacher told his mother that Ken was an incurable stammerer and that the condition would prevent him from speaking normally. Ken's mother asked Ken what he was going to do. Ken replied, "I'm going to take up the loneliest sport I know."He began hitting golf balls at Harding Park, home to the San Francisco Open. By 18, Ken showed promise as a baseball player as well and had a contract with the Yankees. "I found out country club living was better than dugouts so I gave up on the idea of baseball," chuckles Ken.

At 24, Ken had made a name for himself as a highly regarded amateur golfer. The 1956 Masters was his introduction into the big leagues when he led the Masters for three rounds only to lose by a shot in the last round. "I would have been a completely different person if I had won," Ken says. "I have always remembered something [award-winning sportscaster] Jack Whitaker said when he introduced me at an event— Fate has a way of bending a twig and fashioning a man to his better instincts."

Venturi turned pro just seven months after the Masters defeat and became one of the game's brightest stars and top prize earners. He was regarded as one of finest players in the world following the 1960 season. However, an automobile accident in 1961 altered his course. "I didn't break anything but I tore muscles in my back and shoulders and my game went down the tubes," Ken recalls. "I came close to giving up but I remembered what my father said and I just couldn't do it."

By 1963, Ken was in a slump. Then, a man named Bill Jennings changed his life. Jennings owned the New York Rangers and was Chairman of the Westchester Classic in New York. "I was in Indianapolis and had missed a Cup by a shot," says Ken. "I told Bill I needed an invite and that if I didn't get it, I was going back to San Francisco to sell cars." Jennings gave Ken the invite. He finished third. Then, he finished fifth in the Buick Open. Ken could not explain the sudden upturn in his game. A week later, Ken Venturi won the 1964 U. S. Open.

That same year Ken went on to win other tournaments and accolades including PGA Player of the Year, Comeback Athlete of the Year, and Sports Illustrated's Sportsman of the Year. However, adversity loomed ever near. By the end of the year, Ken's hands were starting to fail him. Suffering from a severe case of carpel tunnel syndrome, Ken required an operation. Ken was operated on in June 1965 and came back to win again — at Harding Park in San Francisco.

Still, the problems with his hands persisted. "That is when I made the decision to get another operation. It was serious. I asked my physician if I'd ever play golf again. He said I would, but never to my standards. There was a possibility that I might lose three fingers due to gangrene. I went to my Dad for encouragement. All these years my Dad had pushed me. He never gave too many compliments because he never wanted me to give up. Because of my stammering and other challenges he always encouraged me. This time, he hugged me and said, 'Son, it makes no difference if you never play golf again. You were the best I ever saw.' I went to the doctor the next day and told him to do what he needed to do. My dad told me I was good."

The win at Harding Park would be Ken Venturi's last. "I won my last professional victory on the very same golf course where I hit my first golf ball." But Ken Venturi was about to embark on yet another comeback. "While all this was going on, CBS was asking me to quit the tour entirely and come on board as an analyst," Ken recalls. "Once I talked to my Dad, I took them up on it." Ken began an illustrious 35-year career with the network, becoming one of the most recognized voices of golf.

In the years following, Ken weathered the loss of his first wife, Beau, and both of his parents. Then in 2000, a prostate cancer diagnosis had him making hour-long drives for regular chemotherapy treatments. Even during this challenging period of his life, Ken received an unexpected gift. "I went to dinner one evening and met a woman named Kathleen. We hit it off and I asked her to lunch the next day. Then we had brunch on Sunday, and she asked me what I was doing in town. I felt confident enough to tell her." Kathleen accompanied Ken on his next 35 treatments and a friendship developed. "It was a miracle," says Ken. "There are always two sides to a coin. If I hadn't had prostate cancer, I would have never met my Kathleen."

In November 2007, Ken Venturi was honored with the Lombardi Symbol of Courage award. Ken and Vince Lombardi were friends and had dinner together while he was on tour. Vince was known for referring to Ken as an example to build his players' spirit at halftime. He used Ken's story to illustrate an athlete who "went on heart" and what can be accomplished by truly believing in your own abilities. For Ken Venturi, that's what it is all about — heart.

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