

Lanto Griffin

From broke to the PGA Tour in five months

Unless you follow the PGA Tour closely, you probably haven't heard of me. My best finish is a T-12. I got my card by finishing 22nd on the Web.com Tour last October. Five months earlier, I'd made \$4,800 through 10 events and was thinking about quitting for what must've been the 40th time.

I WAS BORN IN CALIFORNIA IN 1988. But I grew up in Blacksburg, Va. Our parents were hippies. My brother, sisters and I were raised strict vegetarian, and my dad would rather hang out with us than go to his job managing a health-food store. My siblings had their interests, but I loved sports. Dad coached some of my baseball and soccer teams. We didn't have much money, but we had a great life.

I GOT A SET OF CLUBS FOR CHRISTMAS WHEN I WAS 8. Dad nor any of our relatives had ever played. The city municipal was less than a mile from our house, and I could go around all day for \$9. "The Hill" was 2,700 yards. In time, I shot a few 68s that were probably more like 78s. You know how kids can be with mulligans.

THE WORST DAY OF MY LIFE CAME THE SUMMER I WAS 12. My best friend's mom pulled me out of 4-H camp and drove me to the hospital. Dad had a huge scar on his head where they'd removed a brain tumor. He'd been sick for a while. Mom knew, but we just thought it was a cold.

DAD CAME HOME, TOLD US HE WAS GOING TO BE FINE, AND SLOWLY WE WATCHED HIM STRIPPED OF HIS INDEPENDENCE. His body and mind failed him. We got a call from

the health-food store when he backed his car into a pole in the parking lot. With my mom preparing to start work as an elementary school teacher, on top of all else, I couldn't ask her for rides to sports. So I fell deep into golf. I could walk to the course and didn't need anyone.

ON A DAY HE WAS ABLE, MY DAD TOOK ME TO SEE STEVE PRATER, THEN THE HEAD PRO AT BLACKSBURG COUNTRY CLUB, FOR A LESSON. The day my dad died, in our home, Steve called to tell me I was getting an honorary membership to Blacksburg Country Club. Which to me, at that time, felt like Augusta National.

STEVE'S SON AND I BECAME BEST FRIENDS. I'd sleep at their house, and we'd ride with his dad to the club in the morning. I was sad, but golf was a reason not to feel sorry for myself.

I PLAYED FOUR YEARS AT VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY. My first pro event was on the Hooters Winter Series. I shot 71-66-75 to earn \$975. Except for the \$950 entry fee, it felt like the coolest thing ever. In the last round I was paired with Will Wilcox. He'd get to the tour faster, but we stayed close.

I PLAYED A FEW SEASONS IN SOUTH AMERICA, WHICH WAS

A LOT OF FUN. But there comes a point when you don't want to go back. I had \$30,000 on credit cards, and my mom was paying my health insurance. The generous members from Blacksburg Country Club didn't ask me to repay the money they'd invested in me. I was 28, and it was hard telling girls I lived at home half the year. I'd work all week to come out \$3,000 further in debt and wonder, *What kind of job is it that I have?*

AT ONE POINT, THE BIGGEST CHECK OF MY CAREER WAS \$17,000 I MADE CADDIEING. This was with Wilcox when he finished fourth at the Greenbrier Classic. A friend of our family, Stuart Swanson, a successful realtor who has been a second father to me as much as Prater, owned a cabin there. So Wilcox's regular caddie took the week off, and I took a break from missing cuts.

INSIDE THE ROPES ON THE PGA TOUR IS AN EXPERIENCE. But the revelation was seeing Wilcox stroll to the course 35 minutes before his tee time and barely hit balls afterward. I'd been planting myself at courses two hours before and after playing, grinding to get perfect. That Sunday night I drove to a Virginia State Open qualifier. I hadn't touched a club in a week, but it felt good sitting on a check to sort the next three months of entry fees. I shot 64.

LET'S JUMP BACK TO WHERE I STARTED THIS STORY—SPRING OF 2017 AND I'VE MADE \$4,800 THROUGH 10 EVENTS. I'm driving, on the phone with my agent, whom I tell I'm quitting. He says I

should talk to this sport psychologist, Dr. Greg Cartin.

SOON AFTER, I SHOOT 65 TO MAKE IT OUT OF U.S. OPEN LOCAL QUALIFYING. At sectionals, I wind up in a playoff for first-alternate against TJ Hoge, who hits it to three feet on the first hole. He goes to Erin Hills and doesn't get in; I go to the Nashville Open. Fate.

I START SUNDAY T-2 BUT SLIP TO T-5 WITH EIGHT HOLES TO GO. There's a big rain delay, and if the sky doesn't clear by 6:15, the event will be called and the fourth round nullified. I'm minutes away from a check that will qualify me for the Web.com Tour for next year. Cartin and I are texting like mad. With 23 guys within three shots of the lead, I'm worried about how many places I could drop. His message is, "Thoughts aren't real. Dwelling on what could happen is futile." I'm sure that sounds simplistic, but it isn't when you've lived years with numbers incessantly running through your dome. We go back out. I try to "embrace the opportunity" per doctor's orders, and win the event and \$99,000.

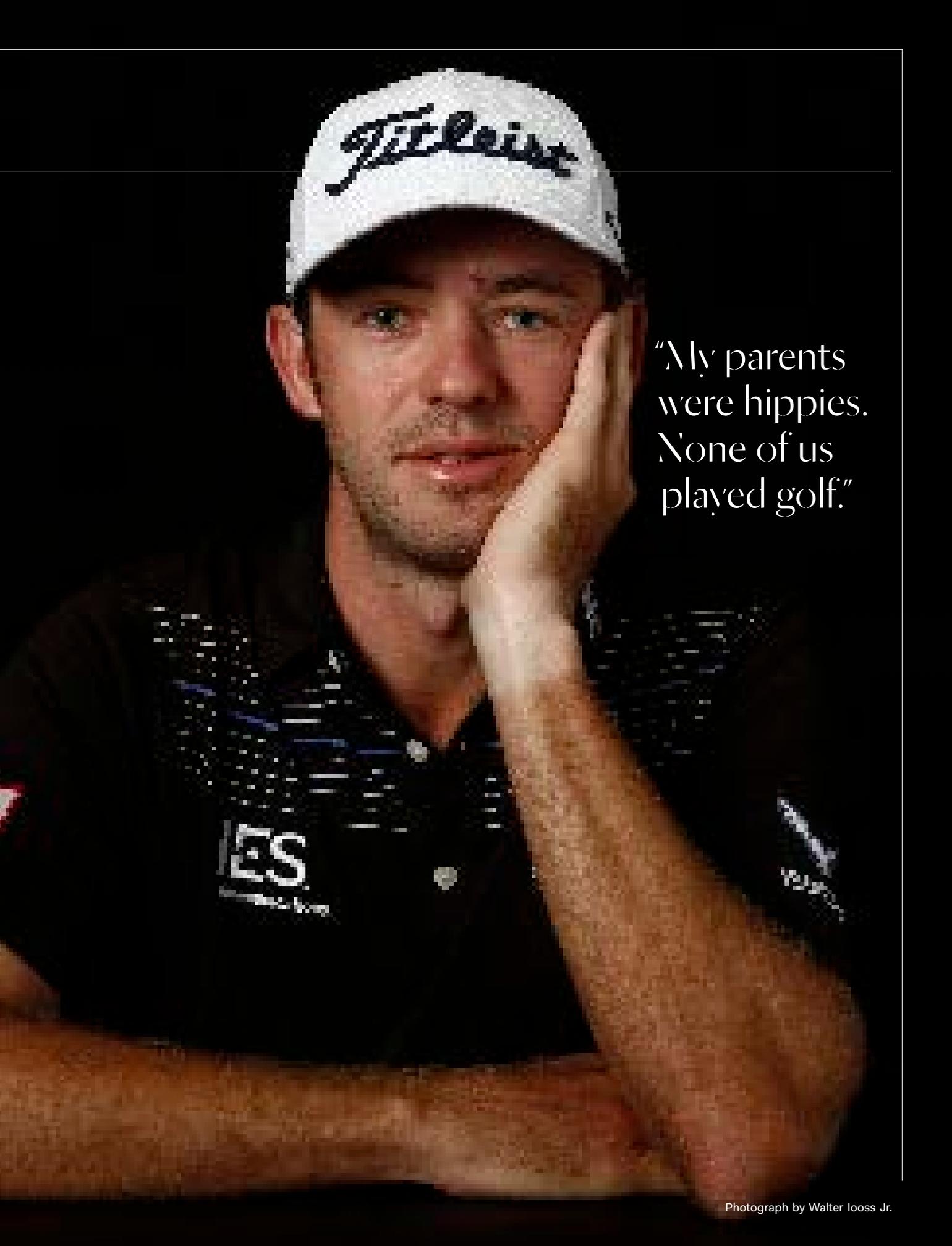
MY LIFE HAS CHANGED A LOT IN A SHORT TIME. I've now got my own place in Ponte Vedra Beach, a girlfriend, and I play TPC Sawgrass whenever I want. I can even afford to fly my mom to come watch me play events.

I WISH MY DAD COULD WATCH JUST ONE. We'd have an adult conversation and beverage after the round. My goal is to win out here, but even if I don't last, I know he'd be proud.

—WITH MAX ADLER

BEST GOLF TIP I'VE HEARD

▶ IF YOU'RE GOING TO MISS A GREEN, MISS TO THE SIDE WHERE YOU CAN CHIP BACK INTO THE WIND FOR MORE CONTROL. BILLY HORSCHTEL, WHO'S BEEN A MENTOR, SHARED THAT WISDOM WITH ME. OF COURSE, HE SAID IT RIGHT BEFORE WE PLAYED THE 17TH HOLE AT PGA NATIONAL, WHICH IS A PAR 3 WITH WATER IN FRONT OF THE GREEN. OF COURSE, THE WIND WAS BLOWING HARD AGAINST US. THAT'S BILLY BEING BILLY.



“My parents
were hippies.
None of us
played golf.”