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GOLF; Acupuncture Needles Help Couples Seek Pins

By CLIFTON BROWN JUNE 12, 2004

If Fred Couples wins the Buick Classic, he will owe a debt of gratitude to his acupuncturist.

Couples's back was throbbing Wednesday night, to the point where he considered withdrawing from the tournament. His wife, Thais, wanted him to rest until next week's United States Open, but Couples tiptoed out of his room Thursday morning and played, sore back and all.

"I teed off early," Couples said. "She was still sleeping."

After gritting his teeth through an opening-round 67, a friend advised Couples to visit Dr. Halina Snowball in Connecticut for an acupuncture session. Couples received treatment on Thursday afternoon and Friday morning, and when he arrived for the second round Friday at Westchester Country Club, he still had an acupuncture pin in each ear.

But the throbbing in his back was gone.

"To me, it's unbelievable what they can do," Couples said.

Couples's play was also impressive. Shooting a six-under-par 65 during a bogey-free round that included six birdies, Couples grabbed a one-stroke lead

heading into the third round Saturday. He was 10 under par for the tournament (132, 67-65), one stroke ahead of Vijay Singh (63-70), Luke Donald (67-66) and Fredrik Jacobson (64-69).

What did Couples's wife think about his decision to play?

"She's downtown with the kids," Couples said. "She'll come home and I'll tell her I'm close, or leading, and she's going to have a heart attack."

It was a continued renaissance for Couples, who finished second Sunday to Ernie Els at the Memorial. That was Couples's best finish of the year. Since the beginning of 2003, his performance has taken a significant leap. After finishing out of the top 100 on the PGA Tour money list in 2001 and 2002, Couples finished 34th last year, and he won last year's Shell Houston Open, his first victory since 1998.

Does Couples, with a history of back problems at age 44, believe he can contend next week at Shinnecock Hills Golf Club?

"Well, now I do," said Couples, who won the 1992 Masters, his only major championship among 18 victories on Tour. "I'll still go with a good attitude to Shinnecock, thinking that I can compete there, too. But it's the same thing, I have to hit the ball in play. Nobody, Phil Mickelson or Vijay, if they don't hit the ball solid at Shinnecock, you can't really compete. That's what they do. That's why they play well, because they hit the ball solid."

Couples did that Friday, overtaking Singh, who began the round with a one-stroke lead over Jacobson. After an opening-round 63, Singh settled for a 70, despite hitting 17 of 18 greens in regulation.

"I just didn't hit it close," said Singh, who had two birdies and one bogey. "I had a lot of chances from 15 feet, 20 feet all day, and just kept missing the hole. I wanted to shoot another low round, but I didn't have it."

Jacobson was the only player to reach 11 under, but he double-bogeyed his final hole, the par-5 No. 9. After missing the green with his third shot at No. 9, Jacobson hit a poor chip that ran off the opposite side of the green, and he two-putted after finally chipping onto the putting surface.

Couples made no such miscues, and his swing was fluid, despite his back troubles. Another acupuncture session was planned before Saturday's third round, and he was optimistic that his back would hold up.

"The pain is gone, so when I walk and my heels hit the ground, it doesn't really hurt," said Couples, who birdied his final two holes for the second consecutive day. "You learn how to play with things. I am swinging pretty well, and things are going well, so it's really not a big deal."

CHIP SHOTS

ERNIE ELS, PHIL MICKELSON and SERGIO GARCÍA were at five under. DAVIS LOVE III was three under, as was the defending champion, JONATHAN KAYE. . . . Those missing the one-under-par cut included MIKE WEIR (even), CHAD CAMPBELL (even), SHIGEKI MARUYAMA (one over), DARREN CLARKE (one over), COREY PAVIN (one over), LEN MATTIACE (two over), MATT KUCHAR (two over), DAVID TOMS (three over), J. L. LEWIS (three over), CRAIG PERKS (three over) and STEWART CINK (four over). . . . DUFFY WALDORF withdrew with a bad back.