The Ultimate Mulligan:

A Story of Friendship and the Gift of Life.

by: Delaney Cha

When Bob Beckelman, PGA, and Matt Gordon, PGA, met at Ocean Pines Golf Club in 1994, nothing could have prepared them for the everlasting bond of friendship they would share forever: a kidney.

Bob and Matt became friends in 1994 when they were both working together at Ocean Pines Golf Club. Bob was pursuing a career in Professional Golf Management and Matt worked at Bag Drop. As time went on, their lives would remain interconnected throughout the golf world, with Matt becoming Assistant Pro to Bob years later. In 2022, Bob found himself back at Ocean Pines and Matt is Assistant Pro at Glen Riddle.

Bob was diagnosed with Polycystic Kidney Disease, an inherited genetic disorder that passes from parents to children.

"Polycystic Kidney Disease is the genetic disease that my family has. It is really prevalent in my family for some reason. Usually, it is a 50/50 gene, but for my family around 80% of my relatives have it.

"My father and two of his brothers had polycystic kidneys, and four out of five of my own siblings have polycystic kidneys. I have nieces and nephews who were diagnosed as well. I have two sisters who had received kidney transplants before me."

Polycystic kidney disease is a slow-progressing disease where numerous cysts grow within the kidneys. The cysts are usually filled with fluid and continue to develop over the years, often overtaking and replacing much of the kidney. The damage done to the kidney from the cysts ultimately leads to kidney failure.

In 2019, Bob was told by his doctors that his kidney functions were dropping.

"I knew I was getting close. I was watching my numbers and I started to go down below 20% functioning and I knew something was going to happen soon."

His kidney doctor was affiliated with the University of Maryland medical system which is the host of one of two main transplant centers in the Maryland. The other one is Johns Hopkins Medicine.

"I chose to work with the University of Maryland for two reasons: they highly advocated finding a donor before I reached the point of dialysis. To me that was a big bonus; I did not want to go on dialysis, nobody wants to go on dialysis if they can help it. The second reason was that the doctors were open to removing the native kidneys."

After meeting with the transplant doctors, they told Bob that he needed to start preparing for a kidney transplant and, if possible, to find a donor who was willing to undergo surgery. In an effort to find a kidney, Bob's wife took to social media. Within a day, Matt responded.

"They highly recommended that I start looking for a donor now. They thought I probably had about a year or two before I needed to go on dialysis or get a transplant," said Bob.

"At this point, [my wife and I] decided to reach out to friends and family first. My wife sent out a Facebook post that basically said 'If you are interested in a transplant, go to this site'.

"Matt saw the post, called me up, and said 'Take it down, I'm in'."

Over the next few weeks, Matt would be "poked and prodded" with needles for blood work and other rigorous health tests. He was denied.

"I had a few other people reach out to me and said that they were interested in donating, but Matt was gonna be my guy. Going through the tests, I was a good candidate for transplant and he was a good candidate to be a donor except for high blood pressure. So his processing fell through.

DONATE LIFE

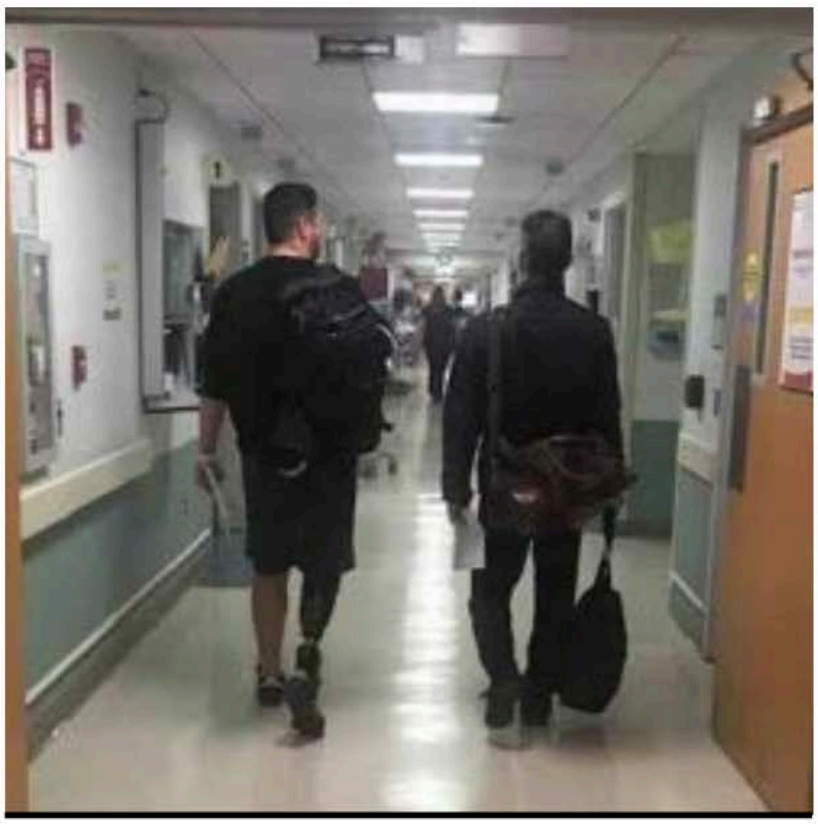
DonateLife.net

"Another friend of mine up in Pennsylvania started testing as well and he passed. The only problem was that he was not a direct match for me. They try to match the donor to the recipient as best as they can to reduce the possibility of rejection. Family members are best, or people with the same blood type, and other factors."

Bob's doctors told him that they were going to attempt something that is called a swap. A swap is a process of continually testing other living donors for other patients until matches are made between the donors and the recipients. This can sometimes involve multiple swaps to find the right match and can take upwards of a year to complete if successful.

"Towards the end of the year, my doctors were getting ready to schedule a procedure to get me prepared for dialysis because my numbers were going down. I hadn't heard anything about the swap so I called my doctor and asked what was going on.

"My doctor said that for whatever reason, no match was popping up for a swap and he recommended that I look for another donor."



BOB BECKELMAN, PGA AND MATT GORDON, PGA

In November 2019, Bob and his wife took to Facebook again.

"SO MY WIFE REPOSTED. MATT RE-RESPONDED AND SAID THAT HE HAD TAKEN CARE OF HIS ISSUE WITH BLOOD PRESSURE."

"The day that the post was made, the following Monday, I was up doing testing," said Matt.

Matt was cleared to be a donor and in December 2019, the transplant surgery was scheduled for January 2020.

"Our surgery was scheduled for January 13. We went ahead and did the transplant and it went great," said Bob.

"During our pre-testing, we found out that we were a 90% match for each other for both tissue and blood," said Matt.

"We were brothers from another mom," Bob said. "I don't remember a ton of the surgery but I remember us meeting in the morning. Matt went into his surgery first, which was successful and then it was time for my surgery."

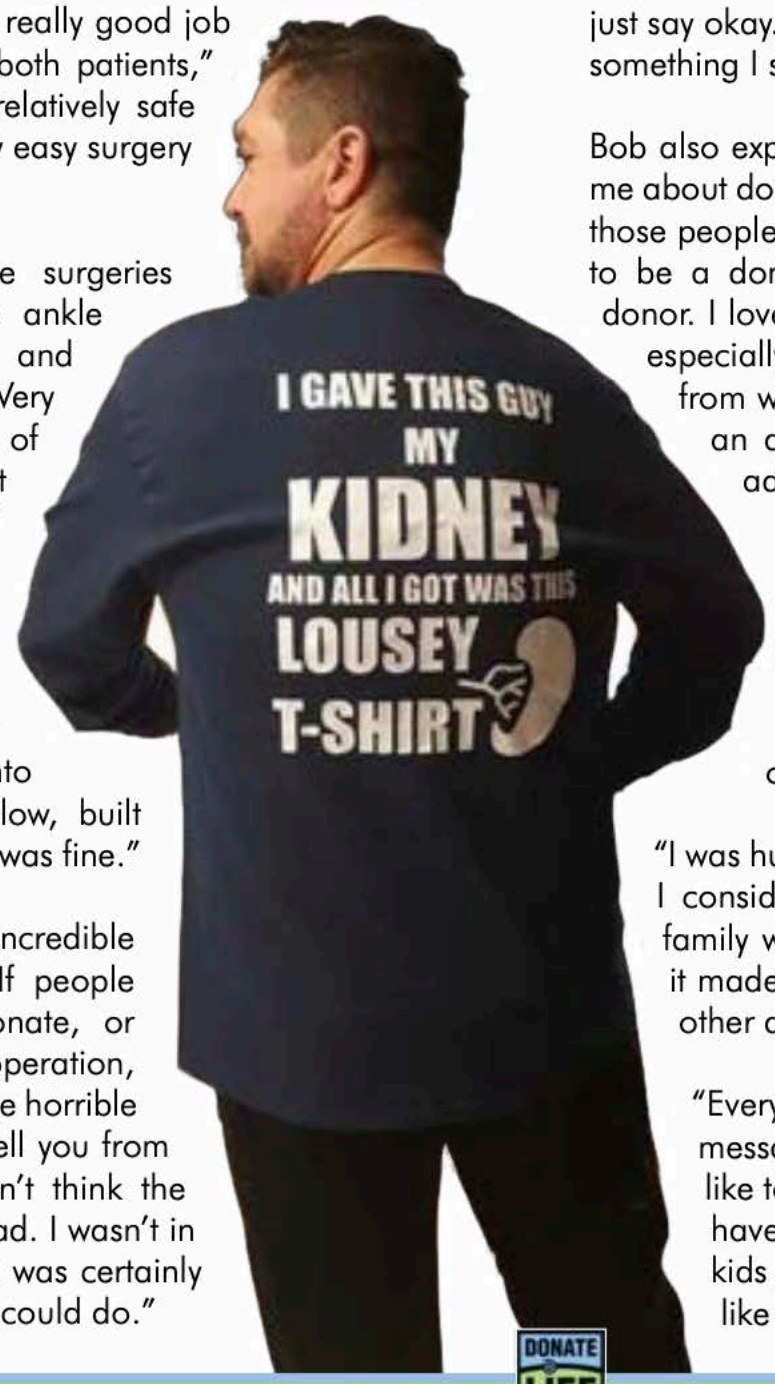
"They took Matt's kidney out and prepped it for transplant, then in my surgery, the doctors took both of my kidneys out, put Matt's kidney in. I wake up the next day and Matt is in the luxury donor suite down the hall. I'm hooked up to tubes, Matt was partying it up with the nurses."

Matt recalled, "I walked down to see you the next day."

Matt spent about three to four days in the hospital before he was discharged, while Bob stayed a little bit longer. During Bob's surgery, both of his native kidneys were taken out, effectively making him lose around 25 pounds from the combined weight of them alone. The average weight of one kidney should be around a quarter of a pound to half a pound.

While the idea of transplant surgery seems incredibly daunting, both men said that the surgery was relatively easy.

"The doctors do a really good job at taking care of both patients," Bob said. "It's a relatively safe surgery, a relatively easy surgery for the donor."



"I've had invasive surgeries in the past, with ankle reconstruction and things like that. Very invasive, a lot of downtime, a lot of recovery time," said Matt. "This wasn't. I had to be careful for about three weeks as things shifted back into place. I took it slow, built back up, and then was fine."

"A donor is an incredible gift," said Bob. "If people are scared to donate, or are scared of the operation, and think it's a huge horrible procedure, I can tell you from my end that I don't think the surgery was that bad. I wasn't in that bad of pain. I was certainly restricted in what I could do."

"To save someone's life through donation is just an incredible gift. The doctors are also incredibly good at it. The surgery was never a concern of mine. I'm more scared of going to the dentist, honestly. It was like 'Well I need this done or I'm going to die' so what was the point of being scared, I was gonna die anyway."

As a living donor and recipient pair, both have undergone the ultimate trial of friendship. Their dedication to each other and the mutual love shared between the two have allowed them to create an impenetrable bond for the rest of their lives. And while both are grateful for the experience, both see themselves as advocates rather than campaigners for living donor transplants.

Matt explains, "I don't talk about it much. If it comes up in conversations then it's something I will advocate for. I don't walk up to someone and say 'Hey, I'm an organ donor, you should be too', it was just something that I felt was something that I needed to do that I could do and it was the right thing. People will say things and I just say okay. If asked, I would certainly explain, but not something I share a ton of."

Bob also explained, "If someone called me and asked me about donation, I would be all over it. I'm not one of those people who shout from the rooftops for someone to be a donor. It's a very personal choice to be a donor. I love giving people the facts about donations, especially the ones that I know from experience, not from what someone has told me. It is huge to be an advocate for yourself as a patient. So an advocate? Yes. A campaigner? No."

This past January, Matt and Bob celebrated their three-year anniversary of the transplant surgery, a small measurement of time in their 30-year friendship, but a moment that will always have an impact on both of their lives.

"I was hugely relieved, that someone like Matt, who I consider a son, brother, cousin, friend, all the family wrapped into one, was the donor because it made it easier. We had done so much for each other already," Bob said.

"Every anniversary, I send Bob the same message," spoke Matt. "Press 1 if you would like to renew your kidney subscription. Our lives have always been intertwined. I've watched his kids grow up, just like he has with mine. It's just like family."

DONATE LIFE