

## HEALTH

# Young Golfer Overcomes Scoliosis

by Deanna Thompson



photo by - L&G Photography, LLC

At age 19, Stephanie Demetrelis is living her dream – playing the links and attending Catawba College on a golf scholarship. Last July, she won the 16-18 girls' title in the High Point Junior Golf Championships. In fall 2009, *Triad Golf Today* featured her picture after she did well in a college tournament.

Her triumphs are all the more amazing because she was forced to give up the sport in October 2008 – racked by pain from scoliosis, a spinal disease she was diagnosed with at 13.

“I couldn't even swing, I was hurting so bad,” Stephanie recalls.

She was able to return to the sport she loves after Max W. Cohen, MD, FAAOS, of Spine & Scoliosis Specialists in Greensboro, performed surgery at High Point Regional

Hospital to correct two abnormal curves in her spine: a 60-degree curve in the mid-section and a 52-degree curve in her lower back.

Scoliosis, which affects an estimated 6 million people in the U.S., causes curves and twists in the spine that can lead to deformity and pain.

The type that Stephanie has – idiopathic adolescent scoliosis – typically is discovered in children (usually girls) during their growth spurt. Stephanie's was found after her mother noticed a hump on one side when she bent over a coffee table at age 13.

Stephanie was referred to Dr. Cohen, a fellowship-trained spine specialist, who found a double curve measuring 40 degrees. Because Stephanie's curve was so severe and she was already through most of her growth spurt, she was not a good candidate for a brace – which sometimes can stop further progression during the growth spurt.

Instead, Dr. Cohen checked her at intervals to track changes. Stephanie continued regular activities, including basketball. Then, in high school, she took up golf. Even as she grew more skilled in the sport, Stephanie was enduring regular pain, and her curvature grew worse – progressing to 46 degrees by 2006. Typically, doctors consider surgery when the curvature is 45 or 50 degrees, or if the patient has pain or decompensation (where the head moves out of alignment with the spine). Stephanie and her parents, Sandra and Gary Demetrelis of Archdale, remained hesitant about surgery.

By the time Stephanie graduated from Vandalia Christian School in 2008, she was hooked on golf – and had received a golf scholarship to attend Catawba College in Salisbury. College brought long golf workouts and intensive study sessions, and her discomfort grew worse. The tipping point came in October 2008, when pain caused her to withdraw from a tournament

after the first round.

She told her parents she was tired of hurting. She wanted surgery.

“I wasn't really that scared about it,” Stephanie says. “I felt like Dr. Cohen really knew this was going to help me. I trusted him completely.”

During the surgery on January 6, 2009, Dr. Cohen used a state-of-the-art technique to straighten Stephanie's curved spine – utilizing screws, hooks, titanium rods and a Dacron band called a Universal Clamp. Stephanie was the first scoliosis patient in the U.S. to benefit from the clamp, which Dr. Cohen helped develop for U.S. use with Abbott Spine.

Bone grafts were then laid over her spine to create a “scaffolding” for the vertebra to grow together in the new straightened position.

“We're actually tricking the body into thinking it has a fracture that needs to heal,” says Dr. Cohen.

Key to the success of the procedure is the “hardware” used to straighten the spine. It holds the vertebra in place while the bone grafts grow together.

Stephanie spent a week in the hospital and several months recovering at home before she was allowed to pick up a golf club again. Patients have limited physical activity during the first year so the bone grafts have time to fuse.

Gradually, Dr. Cohen allowed more activity, and in July Stephanie began practicing golf again.

“I wanted to play so bad,” she recalls. “I just could not wait to get back out there.”

Stephanie was elated when, two weeks after she began practicing again, she won the girls' High Point Junior Golf Championships in her age division.

In fall 2009, she returned to college and the golf team at Catawba. Since her surgery, she has grown two inches – and finds it much easier to chip and putt because her curvature limited movement. She says she doesn't have her old swing back yet on longer drives, but “my putting is so much better that it doesn't matter.” Her goal this year is to score consistently in the low to mid 70s – and for her Catawba team to win a tournament or even a regional title this spring.

Stephanie has no question that the surgery changed her life.

“I would do it again in a second,” she says.

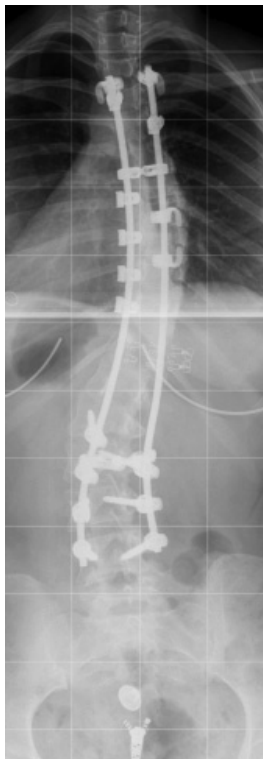


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## BEFORE SURGERY



## AFTER SURGERY



Stephanie Demetrelis had to quit golf when the curvature in her spine grew to 60 degrees in the mid-section and 52 degrees in her lower back as seen in the “before” x-ray. The “after” x-ray on the right shows Stephanie's straightened spine after surgery. Max W. Cohen, MD, used rods, screws, hooks and a clamp to straighten and hold her spine in place.

Deanna Thompson is the owner of Thompson Communications, a Greensboro-based company that provides writing, editing, marketing and public relations services.