

THE IRON LADY

BY AARON PARK

LOCKING IN
Josie Baker '18 prepares to tee off during the girls' golf match against Flintridge Sacred Heart. Baker shot a 2-over 39.

AARON PARK/BIG RED

IT'S THE same routine every time.

Josie Baker '18 leans over, setting a white Titleist Pro V on the tee. She steps back, five or six feet directly behind the tee, and turns to face the sprawling fairway. Steadily, she raises her arms, bringing her driver's head level with her eyes.

She pauses here, at the apex, for only an instant. The driver falls calmly back to her side and she makes the short trek back to the ball, between the tee markers. Setting her feet into the trimmed turf, Baker brings the club back, her backstroke uncoiling seamlessly into an whip-like swing. With a sharp thwack, the little white sphere takes off into the sunny San

Fernando Valley sky.

From start to finish, it's a controlled motion, smooth but brief. It's a motion that speaks to long hours of practice and years of dedication.

The ball lands squarely on the fairway, hundreds of yards downrange. It was only one of many similar drives, as Baker led the Wolverines to victory that day against Notre Dame, shooting a team-best 1-over par.

BAKER'S STORY HAS roots beginning long before she was born. It goes back to her grandfather and uncle, who have been avid golf fans throughout their lives. They introduced her to the sport at a young

age. As a child, she'd accompany her grandfather to the golf range to watch him practice. She received her first set of clubs at the age of six and began taking group lessons, switching to private lessons when she was eight. She's been playing ever since, drawn in by the unique nature of the sport.

"I like how it's very competitive and very concrete," Baker said. "I like how every shot you hit, that's what it is, there's no referee, there's no debating over that. I like the variety of golf. I like how you can play thousands of different courses and each one of them is different, and even if you're playing on the same course, you never have the same shot twice. So it's very concrete in

a way, but it also allows for a lot of creativity when you're playing."

Baker's family has roots in central Colorado, near Denver, and she often travels to the Centennial State to work with her swing coach, Brad Neher. Over the past summer, Baker spent two months honing her skills around the mile-high city, investing hours into practice on the golf course.

"[Golfing] is all I did," Baker said. "That's all I had to do. I just golfed for two months and worked with my coach. I have a lot of friends out there who golf. I play tournaments out there and it really helped me work on my game."

GIRLS' GOLF PROGRAM Head

Marge Chamberlain has known Baker since she was in eighth grade. Since then, Chamberlain has been able to observe Baker's rapid rise through the ranks of the varsity elite.

One of Chamberlain's memories of Baker's freshman season involves Wolf, a popular game within the golf community. The game is played with a rotation of four teammates, in which one player is designated the "wolf" at each hole. The "wolf" then can pick one player to pair with and compete against the remaining two.

Baker, on the other hand, declared that she'd play "lone wolf," meaning that she'd com-

pete against all three of her teammates for more points.

"You have to be humble because it's definitely a game of etiquette and a game of respect for your fellow competitors and for the game," Baker said. "My coach tells me to be internally arrogant. Believe that you can hit the shot you want to hit, believe that you can make the putt, but don't brag about it. Basically, don't be a jerk about it and show respect to everyone around you."

Baker's competitive nature and steady confidence have been a breath of fresh air for Cham-

berlain.

"It's really inspiring because a lot of young women athletes don't want to win, they want to be nice to their teammates," Chamberlain said. "Josie wants to be nice to her teammates, but she wants to win. She's inspired other people to step up and say 'Hey, I want to win, I want to go under par. I wanna be the best player I can be. Let's do it.'"

BAKER'S WORK ETHIC has paid dividends in her development as a player while she refines her game to match her natural talent.

"She's always been a standout ball-striker, she's always been a good iron player," Chamberlain said. "She's taken a lot of time to improve her overall strategy and her chipping and putting have dramatically improved."

In addition, Baker has made strides in the mental aspect of her game, a skill that is integral to development and success in the sport.

"How you set yourself up for the next shot both mentally and technically is what drives the difference between scoring well or not," Chamberlain said. "So being a person who knows how to score is a skillset, just like hitting a wedge shot or a putt. Learning to score is an important part of winning in golf."

Chamberlain compared Baker's resilience with that of PGA Tour member Rory McIlroy, who spent 95 weeks atop the Official World Golf Rankings to go along with four major championships.

"Every player goes through periods of ups and downs," Chamberlain said. "I mean, we saw [McIlroy] struggle last year and now he just won over 11 million dollars. So that's golf, having the emotional resilience to know you're not always going to hit it great, but you still want to stay in the game and score."

Baker herself, however, prefers being compared to current 10th-ranked golfer Rickie Fowler, who competed in the Ryder Cup earlier this month.

"I know people who know [Fowler] and they say he's just the nicest guy and the greatest guy, and he does all this charity work and helps out," Baker said. "He's also a really good golfer, and he's from Southern California too. He's played a lot of the same tours and the same tournaments that I'm playing right now, so I relate to him."

BAKER HAS HER focus set on continuing her career as far as it will lead her after graduating high school.

"I'm really planning to see how golf in college goes and see if it's something that I would consider trying professionally," she said. "I'm not 100 set in anything yet but I definitely see myself at least giving it a go to do it professionally because I really, really, love it."

Between her talent, resilience, and competitive spark, Chamberlain's assessment of Baker's potential is simple, yet bold.

"I think Josie can go as far as she wants."

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CRITICAL STRIKE
Josie Baker '18 tees off during the Wolverines' match against Chamblade Sept. 8. Baker shot 1-over 38.

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