

S.J. company helps get golfers back in the game

By Eric Pinkela
Mercury News

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A San Jose company quietly had a big effect on the results of last week's AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am.

In a sweltering, cramped trailer behind the scenes at Pebble Beach, Steve Hoffman of BackProject was showing off a device that his company developed to treat back pain. Turns out it delivers an added bonus: It can also enhance a golfer's performance.

The device - the ATM2 - looks, and functions, like a big, padded furniture dolly. All week at the AT&T, golfers - including some top professionals - were strapped in for a few minutes of simple exercises. The result, ideally, is that the body is supported by the straps so the exercises can work on the inner muscles where the problems often lie.

Hoffman, an electrical engineer by training, said he was originally drawn to the ATM2 when he first saw an incredible example of the device's pain-relieving properties.

"I saw a demonstration on a 29-year-old lady who had something happen nine months earlier and she was in terrible pain, taking medication four or five times a day," Hoffman, 44, said last week. "Nobody could relieve her pain but after one session she was pain free. It was very emotional."

Hoffman joined on in 2001 and they started producing models in 2002. But it wasn't until

about six months ago that he realized he had a golf aid on his hands. During the exercises, one of the benefits is increased range of motion. As any golfer who has tried to swing a club with a stiff back can tell you, range of motion is everything.

"Golfers understand if you can increase range of motion without any effort, it will help," said Hoffman, 44.

Hoffman took the ATM2 to a golf convention and hit the jackpot when former long-drive champion Gerry James wanted to try it out. The problem was that Hoffman, originally from South Africa, had zero idea who James was.

"I have no clue about golf," Hoffman said. "If my life depended on it, I wouldn't be able to hold a golf club."

After a couple of minutes, James got off the device and found he had increased his already impressive range of motion by 25 degrees. He was hooked and Hoffman has had a free endorsement from James ever since.

Now Hoffman is selling the ATM2 (the name is an acronym for active therapeutic movements) to physical therapists, corporate executives and golfers alike.

BackProject's offices are next to HP Pavilion in downtown San Jose but the heart of the business may soon be on the golf course.

Tap-ins Jeff Brehaut of Los Altos is tied for 17th on the Nationwide Tour money list after two events. Brehaut tied for 33rd at the season-opening Panama Movistar Championship and tied for 11th at the Mexico Open. . . . Today in San Francisco, PGA Tour commissioner Tim Finchem will convey the Presidents Cup charter to S.F. Mayor Gavin Newsom

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. The Presidents Cup will be played at Harding Park Golf Course in October, 2009. . . . I would like to thank the Pro-Am volunteers who took a week of their time to work as media shuttle drivers, especially Cindy, Mike and Ron - whom I sincerely hope makes it back for a second year.

Contact Eric Pinkela at epinkela@mercurynews.com

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