

Green

with **inspiration**

The mother of invention is ... a dazed-out near-brush with flesh-eating disease? How a Penticton couple has transformed a medicated stupor into the greatest golf invention since the sand wedge

by Dawn Renaud

PHOTO BY MARK COFFEY | FREESTONESPIRIT.CA





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n my way to interview Penticton’s newest millionaires-to-be, I’m wondering what kind of house a successful inventor lives in. Unsure when I arrive, I re-check the address and then pull into the driveway. There are a couple of toys in the yard, and the jack-o-lanterns sitting

near the door have that wonderful kid-carved look. This is a family home, complete with an exuberant dog; he bounds over to greet me but pauses obediently when a man in blue jeans and a cotton shirt tells him to settle down.

I recognize Darrell Bachmann from an online video I’ve just watched—he and his wife, Colleen, recently emerged victorious from CBC’s infamous reality television show *Dragons’ Den* where budding inventors and entrepreneurs try to get investment dollars for their ideas from a group of five of Canada’s wealthiest (and hard-nosed, sometimes insulting) tycoons. Colleen welcomes me into their living room and I start my recorder. It’s picking up the clickety-clack of claws as the dog scampers about on the hardwood floor, so he’s banished to the yard for the duration.

We begin with the basics: Darrell was born in Yellowknife, NWT, and raised in Courtenay, BC. After graduation he went to college in Toronto, emerging five years

later with the know-how to build and manage golf courses. That was the beginning of a serendipitous adventure. “I went to Courtenay just to connect with some friends for a weekend,” he says. “It turned out they were building a golf course there and I got involved in the construction.”

After a few years at Courtenay’s Crown Isle Golf & Country Club, “I got the head superintendent’s job at the Falls Golf and Country Club in Chilliwack,” he says. “That’s where this whole thing really evolved.”

Opportunity Knocks

Until the early 1990s, golfers wore shoes with metal spikes sticking out of the soles to provide traction while they took a big swing at the ball. Softer, more flexible plastic spikes were just being introduced to the market when Darrell first saw

them at a superintendents’ conference in Orlando. “We were a brand-new golf course just under construction, and I thought: We could open the golf course six months earlier if we changed everybody from metal spikes to soft spikes.”

Darrell seized the opportunity. “We ordered 10,000 units and changed everybody’s spikes. I was the first superintendent in the world to mandate soft spikes at my course because we would not let metal spikes out; the greens were too juvenile.” (Not being a golfer, I have to ask for clarification: No, that’s not 10,000 pairs of shoes. The spikes screw into the sole of the shoe; remove the metal one, replace it with a soft spike, and voila! Kinder, gentler traction.)

OK, I get that, but I’m still wondering what’s the big deal. After all, it’s just grass. Darrell explains that the problem arises on the green. “You’re cutting turf at less than one-eighth of an inch.” I try to picture my lawn surviving this—impossible.

“Metal spikes were always the best traction,” he says, so the soft spikes were a compromise solution and although they’re easier on the greens they still do plenty of damage. It was only a matter of time before someone came up with an even better idea.

Meanwhile, Darrell met Colleen. Born and raised in Merritt, she was looking for a change when she moved to Chilliwack. “I wanted something different and physical; I wanted to get strong,” she says. “I had entered a gym contest—change-your-body-in-three-months kind of thing—so I thought working at a golf course would be a really good way to do that.” She liked the early hours and loved the tranquility of working outdoors on her own. “I think it was the best job I ever had.”

One change led to another. “I was actually working for Darrell, and we fell in love and became best friends over the course of a year,” she says. When Colleen quit her job and moved away, Darrell asked

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her to come back and marry him.

The family moved to Penticton three-and-a-half years ago. Colleen has done a little work from home and devotes most of her time to raising the children, while Darrell got into landscape construction, running machinery and installing irrigation. He says that although he loves landscaping and creating something for someone else, his passion is building and tending golf courses.

“Everybody at a golf course is happy every day, because they’re golfing. It’s where they want to be, not where they have to be. We’d work 16 hours a day,” he adds, “but not one day did it ever feel like work.”

The labour in his new work was much the same, but the atmosphere was very different. He points out that most landscaping goes in at the end of a long building process and by then clients are stressed, exhausted and running out of funds. While coping with

this different environment, Darrell was suddenly faced with near-disaster—and a serendipitous revelation.

“I was very sick last year with cellulitis, the stage before flesh-eating disease,” he says, indicating his thigh. “I was days away from tissue removal and amputation. For two weeks I was going to the hospital for intravenous.”

The antibiotics left Darrell in a daze. He was dozing on the couch in the wee hours of the morning with the golf channel on television, and he recalls thinking, “Wow, someone’s come up with retractable metal spikes. That is just unbelievable.”

From Dream to Reality

“I’m sitting there dazing in and out and then I realize, hold on a minute—that wasn’t an infomercial.” Darrell immediately went to the kitchen table and began designing the shoe and the mechanism. “I woke Colleen up at about 3 a.m. and said, ‘Hey, honey, we’re

going to be rich.’ She said, ‘What?’ and I said, ‘I just dreamt and designed retractable metal spikes.’”

Colleen started researching whether there were other retractable metal spikes on the market. She found a few, but says Darrell’s design, which they dubbed KickSpike, was completely different and more effective.

The Bachmanns thought they were on to something. They took their idea to a lawyer in Kelowna for a patent search, then paid a firm to use high-tech computer software to test the design. Darrell says the program ran for “24 hours and 30,000 on and offs” to make sure it would stand up. Next, they had an engineering firm in Salmon Arm create the mechanism, which they placed in a shoe.

At this point, the couple wanted confirmation. “We’d go to our friends and we say, ‘Hey, check this out...,’ and if you’re our friend what are you going to say?” Darrell asks me.



I play the typical friend, enthusing. “Wow, that is so exciting! What a great idea!” even though I’ve already admitted I know nothing about golf.

“Yeah,” says Darrell, nodding. “So we needed to check it out before we went any further.” They took their prototype to the PGA show to see if it really was a good idea. “Well, we got swarmed. These are PGA pros, golf course owners...” The masses believed in it immediately.

Darrell says that of 30 thousand or 40 thousand people only about one per cent were negative—and the naysayers changed their minds once they understood what they were seeing. One skeptic looked at the heavy sole on the prototype and said, “You’re going to have to change the shaft length.” Darrell explained that the actual KickSpike shoe will appear no different than a regular golf shoe; even the push-button will disappear into the back of the rubber sole. A golf course owner wondered at first how he would enforce proper use of the spikes, but quickly agreed that it wouldn’t take long for it to become a matter of etiquette.

The verdict was in: KickSpike shoes were heralded as the best idea since the sand wedge. They’re good for the environment—less stress on the greens means the grounds will need less fertilizer, less fungicides and less water. And it’s not just about golf. Other potential applications include footwear for loggers, hikers and ordinary folk who need to get around safely when it’s icy.

After the PGA show, it was full steam ahead. The Bachmanns took the risk of making KickSpike a full-time commitment and Colleen believes that’s why they’ve come so far in such a short time. She points out that plenty of people come up with good ideas, but to be fully committed and follow it through takes courage. “We’ve had such scary moments.... Are we going to eat this month?”

In order to promote their

product and find investors, the couple has done a lot of travelling. “It’s been really great to do everything together,” Colleen says. Her parents live on the Westside, and they have been very supportive by coming to stay with the children at a moment’s notice. “We’ve been very, very fortunate in having them around so that we can just drop everything and go,” says Darrell.

He and Colleen have met with golf industry professionals and sporting equipment manufacturers in Las Vegas, Seattle, Orlando and Boston, but one of their most exciting—and lucrative—adventures was presenting their product to potential investors on *Dragons’ Den*.

Meet the Dragons

When the couple first came across the *Dragons’* audition site, they thought it would be worth a try. The auditions were to be held in Kelowna for the first time since the show began, so they arrived early. “When you see something like *American Idol* on television, you see the line-ups, line-ups and line-ups, so we thought that’s what we’d be dealing with,” says Darrell. The auditions started at 10 a.m. so he and Colleen showed up at 8:30 expecting a crowd. “The second person got there at a quarter to ten,” Darrell says, laughing.

In the audition, entrepreneurs are given a mere 10 minutes to make their pitch. “They told us, ‘You’ve got two minutes to speak, eight minutes for questions, and you’re gone.’ But that’s not how it happened. “Everyone was so interested; the camera people were asking questions,” Darrell says. “When we did come out of there an hour and twenty minutes later, the [waiting] room was packed.”

Admitting that they are very new to the whole idea of investment on this scale, the Bachmanns appreciated the coaching and the extra help they were given during the audition process. “We initially said we wanted \$10 million for 25 per cent [of the company], just

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“...we want to give back a lot.”

because we didn't know,” says Darrell. Colleen laughs, adding, “They're like: ‘Yeah, right!’”

Darrell spent hours perfecting his demonstration and off they went to meet the Dragons. “We were in the den for an hour-and-a-half to make 12 minutes of tape,” says Darrell. Within a few minutes the Dragons were convinced of the product's potential and began fighting among themselves for a piece of the action. As the battle continued Darrell found himself waving the KickSpike flag he had brought as a prop for his demo, asking “Can't we all just be one big KickSpike family?”

He never did get to run through his demonstration, but when the couple left the den they had a deal for \$1 million and all five of the Dragons were on board.

Since then the Bachmanns have been busy doing the work required to secure the investment and spending time as a family; keeping the kids grounded is very important to them. They're also looking for ways to pay it forward. “We've been given so much through this experience that we want to give back a lot,” Colleen says.

Darrell is hoping someday to be in a position to contribute a wing to BC Children's Hospital. And, naturally, golf is never far from his mind: he'd like to build Canada's best golf course right here in the Okanagan. “I want to bring the Canadian Open here,” he says. “That's my goal.”

Given this couple's willingness to pursue their dreams, anything's possible. **OL**