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SALIMAH MUSSANI



By Mike Dempster

## Salimah Mussani finds victory on the course and against the illness she battles every day

# STOPPABLE

On the truly horrible days, Salimah Mussani remembers being unable to move. Confined to her bed, the five-foot, two-inch professional golfer felt like she weighed 300 pounds.

Her body was wrapped in a painful rash; joints ached as though she'd been hit by the worst flu imaginable. Everything burned.

Climbing a few stairs sucked the breath out of her. Thoughts of playing golf were out of the question. Many times the Burlington, Ont. native withdrew from tournaments after finishing just one or two rounds.

That was about 18 months ago. Mussani was at the mercy of lupus, a sometimes painful and debilitating autoimmune disease. Her attacks were so bad, doctors advised her to quit the game.

No one quite knows what causes

lupus, which has no cure, but two of its prime triggers are a golfer's constant companions - sun and stress. A fierce competitor, Mussani didn't listen to the doctors who told her to quit and today the 26-year-old's life reads like a remarkable fairytale that is both inspirational and unexpected.

When the lupus was at its worst in early 2005, Mussani spent more time in bed than playing golf. It showed in her game as she earned a depressing \$540 (US) in 11 tournaments on the Duramed Futures Tour.

She turned pro four years ago, playing without distinction until this year when she began fulfilling the great expectations predicted for her from the moment she first touched a club 13 years ago.

Between May 30 and July 18 this year, Mussani won three tournaments.

First, she captured the second leg of the CN Canadian Women's Tour in a playoff at the Settlers' Ghost Golf Club in Barrie, Ont. In doing so, she automatically qualified for the 2006 CN Canadian Women's Open where she made the cut and finished T58. She captured the 72-hole Duramed Futures Players Championship in June by a convincing five shots, leading from the second round. In oppressive mid-July heat, she then cruised to an eight-shot win with back-to-back 66s at the Ottawa Hunt and Golf Club, winning her second straight CN Canadian Women's Tour title.

So what happened to Salimah Mussani this year?

She's made some small swing changes; her irons are crisper and her putter (she putts left-handed and swings right) has gotten as hot as the

summer temperatures, she says. Years of hard work are paying off and her confidence is high. But something more important has changed; she's come to terms with living with lupus.

In Canada, about 50,000 people suffer from some form of lupus. Called the "disease with a thousand faces," Lupus Canada says it's included in a family of non-contagious diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, juvenile diabetes and scleroderma, a rare disease that hardens and thickens the skin.

Individuals with lupus can be affected by a variety of symptoms including achy joints, high fevers, arthritis, extreme fatigue, skin rashes, anemia, pain in the chest, seizures, sun or light sensitivity and abnormal blood clotting problems.

Mussani is typical of many sufferers. While lupus affects men and

Her father Anil remembers a 1993 family trip to North Carolina when he and his wife, Shamim, played a game while the local pro let their three children – Salimah was 13 and had never hit a club before – smack some balls on the range.

"We had been on the course for maybe three holes when the pro came out in his cart," Anil recalls. "Our reaction was, 'Oh my God, the kids have gotten into trouble.'" Instead, he excitedly told Salimah's parents: "Invest in this girl, because you have a pro on your hands."

Only two years later, Mussani won the Ontario Junior Girls' Championship. The next year, 1996, she captured the Ontario championship again and won her first national title at the Canadian Junior Girls' Championship.

Leo Zampedro has worked with Mussani since she was 13. The Cleve-

at a time, then takes a week or two off and doesn't touch her clubs. Instead, she sleeps, sits in front of the TV or computer, and lets her body heal.

It's been more than nine years now since her body rebelled. The first sign surfaced the afternoon of her senior prom in 1997 during a routine medical check. She was to attend the University of Texas at Austin in the fall and the physical was required. That evening while she was dancing at the formal, her dad received a call. Their family doctor wanted Mussani in hospital immediately.

"I got home at 3 a.m. and my dad was up waiting for me, which was really unusual because I was always a good girl, never in trouble," she says. "The blood tests showed I had zero platelets in my system. Basically if I had been bumped or scratched or anything that night, I would have

**"I saw two or three doctors who said the same thing - quit golf."**

women equally, females between 15 and 45 are eight times more likely to get it, a statistic that suggests a link between lupus and hormones. An articulate Mussani speaks like a physician when discussing the disease. After being diagnosed in college, she spent the next three days "solidly" on the internet learning everything she could.

Her recent ill health is a sharp contrast to her youth when she was anything but sickly. Born and raised in Burlington, 50 kilometres west of Toronto, Mussani excelled academically in school and lived for sports, a dynamo in basketball, volleyball, soccer, tennis, field hockey, softball, track and field and golf. Golf suited her psyche best. She liked being outdoors, loved the challenge, and best of all, enjoyed the personal accountability. And she was gifted.

land, Ohio golf professional calls her one of the top five players he's ever worked with and that includes Barb Mucha, a five-time winner on the LPGA Tour. Zampedro says Mussani is a "world beater" who would be on the LPGA Tour already if not for lupus.

"Her biggest strength is her attitude," he says. "She's out there enjoying herself and if she makes a mistake, she doesn't beat herself up. "The only weakness she has is the lupus. She has to learn to control when she can play and when she can't play. I still think she'll make it (on tour)."

Mussani admits she's finally accepted the disease.

"I've become smarter. I can't play every week. Even though I might feel OK, all it does is run my body down and with that comes lack of concentration and lack of focus."

She now plays two to three events

had internal bleeding. There was nothing to clot."

Tests showed her bone marrow was producing platelets but her spleen was consuming them faster than she could produce them. While no one knows for sure what causes the disease, Lupus Canada notes that the immune system (the body's defence against viruses and bacteria) can't tell the difference between intruders and the body's own tissues. Trying to do its job, the immune system attacks parts of the body that cause inflammation, creating the symptoms of lupus.

Mussani spent the summer of 1997 in and out of hospital, receiving infusions of platelets "by the millions," nine hours at a time, two days in a row. It didn't work and her spleen was removed that August. She was better almost immediately. That fall and



winter, Mussani enjoyed a healthy freshman year at Texas. She won the 1997 Texas 5A Championship, returning home in summer to again bag the 1998 Canadian Junior title.

By 1999, her health was failing again and she felt constantly fatigued. When Mussani transferred to Stanford University after her second year in Texas, the team doctor, a rheumatologist, diagnosed the lupus.

Relieved by the diagnosis, Mussani still struggled with the disease. Conventional medication didn't work and golf aggravated her symptoms.

"Sun and stress are the two main triggers for lupus," she says. "I saw two or three doctors who said the same thing, 'Quit golf.' But I said, 'next doctor, next doctor.'"

Two years ago, she found hope. A physician at McMaster University in Hamilton prescribed the chemotherapy drug Cellcept. She takes it twice a day, every day, and her flare-ups are fewer and less severe. Now the disease knocks her down for three or four days, unlike the four to six weeks in the past.

A steadfast friend for two years,

fellow Futures Tour player Lisa Fernandes probably knows better than anyone what Mussani has suffered. "What she has could kill her," Fernandes says. "It's life threatening and I don't think people understood that. In past years when she was withdrawing (from tournaments), some people asked why she didn't just take anti-inflammatories."

Fernandes helped tell her friend's story in 2005 when Mussani was awarded the Futures Tour's Heather Wilbur Spirit Award. In October 2003, Wilbur, a fellow professional from Moncton, New Brunswick, lost an 11-month battle to acute myelogenous leukemia at age 27.

"I knew Heather well," Fernandes says. "Her spirit was very genuine, very caring, very in touch with what other people are doing in their lives. She was not centred on her own life."

Fernandes nominated Mussani for the award, voted on by players, because she embodies the same selfless attitude showed by Wilbur.

"When Sal gets finished after a bad round, she's not the first person to have a pity party by herself," Fer-

nandes explains. "She'll come by and say, 'how's everybody doing, how'd you guys do?'"

"She's awesome at keeping in touch. She keeps track of people and what they are doing and where they are, even though she's so on the go. She takes time out of her day to find out how everyone else is doing."

Mussani knew Wilbur as a junior and a pro and gets "chills" thinking of the award. Wilbur's passing and the recent death of another Futures Tour player - Gaelle Truet was killed in June while driving to a tournament - have helped Mussani keep her perspective on what's really important.

She already understands how precious life is and how fortunate she is. During her bleakest moments, when she was confined to bed, she recognized that golf was her life's passion. Quitting, as doctors advised, wasn't an option.

"The beauty of golf is that everybody hits their prime at different times," she says. "As long as I'm enjoying it and improving, meeting the goals that I've set for myself, I'm going to keep doing it."