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For golf teacher, life came down to one peanut

With a home and business interests in California, and a golf career that once took him across the United States and overseas, Bob Thatcher has eaten thousands of those airline peanuts. But it's the one peanut that cracked his tooth that probably saved his life.

When Thatcher, 65, the owner of Olde Masters Golf Club in Newtown Square and Olde Masters Family Golf Center in Egg Harbor Township, N.J., went to get the tooth fixed, it set in motion a series of events that led to a diagnosis of throat cancer in July 2002.

After radiation treatment and rest, Thatcher, a former Senior PGA Tour member and one of the Philadelphia area's most notable instructors, is back teaching and starting to play golf again. He even has set a long-range goal of using up a few exemptions that he has remaining on what is now the Champions Tour.

This month, Golf Range Magazine, the publication of the Golf Range Association of America, named Thatcher to its list of the top 50 teachers in the United States. While the honor pleases him, it's nothing compared to the joy of being a cancer survivor.

"I was very fortunate that it stayed in my throat," Thatcher, who also played senior golf in Europe in the mid-1990s, said Friday. "Had I not addressed the tooth, and the dentist not found it, it might have been a different story. The dentist saved my life. I told him, 'I owe you big-time, Bubba.' "

The Broomall dentist, Tom Watson - "Yeah, he's related to *that* Tom Watson and he plays golf," Thatcher said - checked out the cracked tooth last summer and sent Thatcher to an oral surgeon, who performed tests and a biopsy and detected the cancer.

Rather than travel to Philadelphia from his home in West Chester for twice-daily radiation treatments, Thatcher opted to undergo treatment in Palm Springs, Calif.

"I didn't tell anyone except my wife, my kids, my lawyer, and a few other people," he said. "I wanted to downplay it. It's nobody else's business. I was very concerned for my wife and kids. I told them essentially why I went out West was so they wouldn't have to put up with me seven days a week."

Thatcher underwent seven straight weeks of radiation, twice a day, which he said eventually had the effect of "being hit over the head with a baseball bat." He lost more than 40 pounds. He couldn't eat or drink anything by mouth for three months.

"In a way, you have to take it as a job," he said. "My good wife put up with me. Believe me, I wasn't a pleasant individual to be with. But I didn't have to worry about anything because I have good people running my businesses."

Thatcher came home for good in April. After an examination last month, he said, "Things are looking good for the first time in about a year."

He has gradually increased his teaching load and is enjoying it more. He's hitting balls on the practice range and plans to play tomorrow in an outing marking the reopening of the course at White Manor Country Club in Malvern.

"I feel fine and I'm beginning to get stronger," he said. "I'm finding out again what it's like to hit the driver about 210 yards. But that's fine. I've been lucky. I thank God it worked out the way it did."