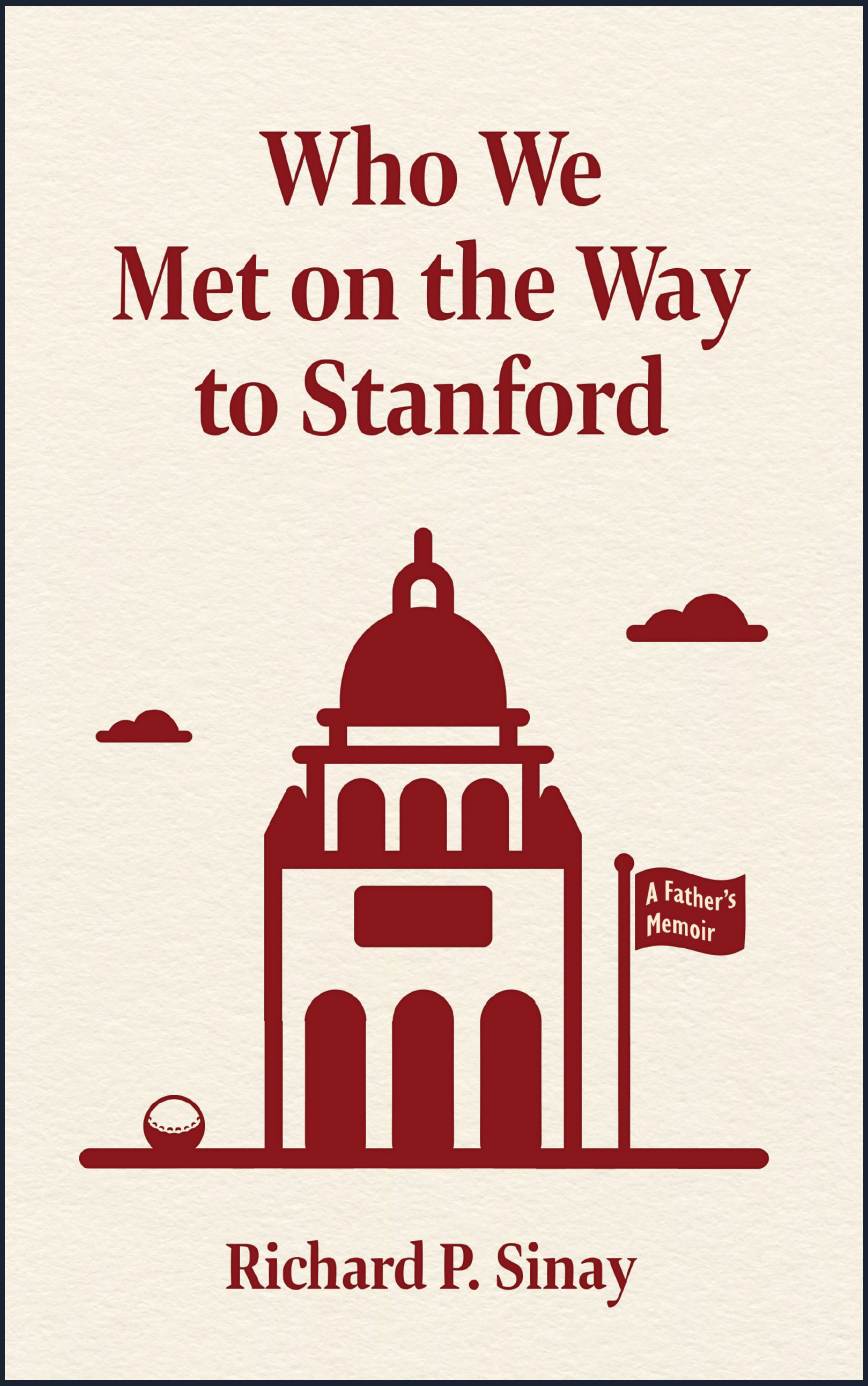
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Who We Met on the Way to Stanford

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BookGist Summary

Who We Met on the Way to Stanford

by Richard P. Sinay

Genre: LANGUAGE ARTS & DISCIPLINES / Writing / Nonfiction (incl. Memoirs) (LAN005060)

Key Takeaways

• Brian’s golf began as a way for father and son to spend time together, not as a plan to produce a professional golfer. His talent and competitive drive gradually turned a casual activity into a demanding pursuit.

• A major goal can motivate years of effort, but achieving it does not automatically provide a new direction. Brian’s overriding aim was to earn a golf scholarship to Stanford; once he did, his motivation for golf began to fade.

• The memoir presents athletic development as a combination of ability, practice, sound instruction, putting touch, psychological resilience, and opportunity—not simply hours spent hitting balls.

• Parents make substantial sacrifices in supporting a young athlete, from travel and tournament expenses to time and emotional investment. Those sacrifices can deepen family bonds, but they can also create expectations that the athlete may not share.

• Early success in junior golf does not guarantee success in college or on professional tours. The book contrasts Brian’s junior achievements with the varied outcomes of peers such as Hunter Mahan, Kevin Na, James Oh, and others.

• The quality and fit of coaching matter. Sinay believes Brian’s transition to Stanford was badly affected by a change in coach, conflicting expectations, limited playing opportunities, and failures around a promised redshirt year.

• A scholarship is not merely a prize for past performance: it carries ongoing responsibilities for the student-athlete and the institution. The memoir's central conflict comes partly from differing ideas about what those responsibilities meant.

• The story is told retrospectively and explicitly from a father's perspective. Rediscovered notes and newspaper interviews help Sinay reconsider what he missed at the time, but he acknowledges that other people involved may remember events differently.

• Loss and disappointment do not erase achievement. Brian stopped playing college golf, but he graduated from Stanford, built a career at Google, and formed a family; his father ultimately learned to accept a life that did not follow his hoped-for script.

Who Should Read This Book

This memoir is best suited to parents of young athletes, junior golfers, coaches, and readers interested in the emotional costs of competitive youth sports. Parents will find a candid account of the time, travel, instruction, money, and family commitment involved in supporting a talented child, along with a caution about assuming that a young athlete's goals will remain the same after a major milestone. Golf readers will also enjoy the book's encounters with well-known players and its view of the junior tournament world from the sidelines of a family pursuing a specific college goal. Readers should approach it as one father's reflective account, not a neutral investigation of Stanford's golf program: Sinay explicitly writes from his own perspective and relies in part on recollections and notes supplied by Brian. Compared with books focused on the habits of champions or practical golf instruction, this is less a guide to improving performance than a family memoir about ambition, coaching, disappointment, and acceptance. Its most lasting value is its reminder that a child's achievement may fulfill one dream while leaving the parent to reconsider what success was supposed to look like.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: 1985–1988 — Tiger Woods and Hitting Golf Balls in Diapers

Sinay opens by recalling Tiger Woods's famously early start in golf, then places Brian's childhood alongside it without claiming the boys had the same ambitions or circumstances. Brian first handled a plastic club and Wiffle balls, and his father introduced putting at local courses. Golf was initially one activity among several: Brian also played soccer and baseball, reflecting his father's belief that children should have room for a broader childhood rather than specialize too early. The family's move to Irvine gave Brian access to public courses and practice areas. Sinay describes learning golf instruction himself, using David Leadbetter's book to develop a better understanding of the swing and teach Brian basic technique. Brian's

early feel for putting and his ability to make contact helped the game become enjoyable. The chapter's central lesson is that young athletes can benefit from early familiarity and play, while parents should be cautious about mistaking early promise for a predetermined professional future.

Chapter 2: 1989 — Kevin Na and Learning the Golf Swing

At about eight, Brian practiced in the summers but still played golf mainly for enjoyment with his father. Sinay reflects on the debate between innate ability and acquired skill, drawing on the popular 10,000-hour idea while emphasizing that practice by itself is not enough: poor technique can be repeated for thousands of hours without producing improvement. He recognizes that he initially lacked the knowledge to teach the swing and short game well, and advises parents to assess instructors carefully rather than assume every professional is an effective teacher. The chapter also introduces Kevin Na, whose suspension from junior golf became a period of intense practice and development. Na's persistence, putting ability, and eventual success on the PGA Tour illustrate how setbacks can become turning points, though success remains uncertain. Brian, too, showed a natural touch on the greens, a strength his father believed could distinguish him as a junior player. The chapter contrasts Brian's Stanford-focused ambition with the more explicit professional-tour aspirations of many peers.

Chapter 3: 1990 — Jack Nicklaus, Chris Tidland, Phil Mickelson, and Joining a Country Club

When Brian's comfort with a club became clear, the family joined Dove Canyon Country Club, a Jack Nicklaus-designed course. Playing regularly exposed him to more demanding conditions and improved his ability to manage difficult greens, recoveries, and short-game shots. He broke 80 from the red tees at nine. Sinay recounts meeting Nicklaus at the course's dedication: Nicklaus famously hit a ball through a fork in a tree, then greeted Brian and signed several items for him. The family also played with former student Chris Tidland, whose later career became an example of persistence through repeated attempts to qualify for the PGA Tour and eventual injuries. Brian met Phil Mickelson at the course and received an autograph, another early encounter with a future star. These meetings made golf's wider community tangible, but Sinay stresses that he was not then trying to turn his son into a professional. The value of the club, he argues, was the opportunity to practice, play, and learn by watching skilled golfers.

Chapter 4: 1991 — Hunter Mahan and Winning the First Tournament

Brian entered Southern California Junior Golf Association events in the 11-and-under group and emerged among a small circle of leading players, including James Oh, Steve Conway, and the younger Hunter Mahan. Sinay describes Mahan's early promise and the decision by Mahan's father to move the family to Texas so Hunter could receive instruction from Hank Haney. Mahan's later success, including wins on the PGA Tour and a Ryder Cup appearance,

becomes an example of how coaching and family commitment can change a young player's trajectory. Brian won his first tournament in Borrego Springs at nine, shooting 42 for nine holes in difficult wind. He also competed at the prestigious Yorba Linda Junior Invitational, where he missed the cut by one stroke. Rather than treating the result as a failure, Sinay portrays it as useful exposure to stronger competition. The chapter shows how a young player's confidence can grow through both victories and close losses, while introducing the substantial parental decisions that can accompany an athletic ambition.

Chapter 5: 1992 — J. J. Killeen, Matthew Rosenfeld, Lorena Ochoa, and The Japan Cup

At ten, Brian entered the San Diego Junior World Championship, a large international tournament held on the short, demanding Presidio course. After practicing there on repeated trips, he finished second, just behind his longtime competitor James Oh. That result earned him an invitation to The Japan Cup, an all-expenses trip for leading Junior World finishers. Sinay describes the tournament's organization, televised coverage, corporate sponsors, hospitality, and the heat and hills of the Japanese course, making the trip one of the family's most memorable golf experiences. The Japan Cup also brought Brian and his family into contact with future professionals, including Lorena Ochoa, who dominated her age group and later became one of the LPGA's leading players. Other competitors, including Matthew Rosenfeld and J. J. Killeen, followed different paths toward professional golf. Their contrasting careers reinforce the book's recurring point: junior success is a beginning, not a guarantee. Brian's strong local season and international experience furthered his golf development, but at this stage he still had no stated plan to become a tour professional.

Chapter 6: 1993 — James Oh and Junior World

Brian returned to Junior World at the more challenging Pine Glen course, where he finished third after preparing through several practice visits. The tournament field included future golf figures such as Ricky Fowler's longtime caddie Joe Skovron, as well as James Oh, the previous year's champion. Sinay recounts how Oh's junior career continued to flourish: Oh won the U.S. Junior Amateur, defeated Aaron Baddeley in the final, and accumulated other notable junior victories before turning professional early. The chapter also reflects on the limitations of a junior résumé. Oh's professional career did not match his extraordinary junior record, and he later built a career as a short-game instructor. Brian, meanwhile, continued winning local tournaments and remained among Southern California's top young players. The contrast helps establish one of the memoir's key themes: talent and early trophies reveal potential, but a long-term career depends on many additional factors, including development, instruction, temperament, and the ability to adapt.

Chapter 7: 1994 — Steve Conway and The Stanford Story

Brian won the 11–12 division at Junior World, defeating James Oh and other strong competitors in a close final round. The victory made him a Junior World champion and confirmed his ability to compete nationally. Soon afterward, a conversation with friend Steve Conway introduced him to Stanford. Brian became attached to the idea of attending the university, began wearing a Stanford sweatshirt, and made earning a golf scholarship there his central goal. Sinay traces the family and educational circumstances that supported this ambition, including the decision to have Brian and his sister enter school as older students in their classes. He also describes the academic demands of University High School and Brian's strong record as a student. A letter to Stanford coach Wally Goodwin began a relationship that would shape the next several years. The chapter shows how a casual conversation can crystallize into a powerful personal goal—and how, once Brian adopted that goal, his golf acquired a purpose distinct from the professional ambitions of many of his peers.

Chapter 8: 1995 — Gary Player and South Lake Middle School

Brian played frequently in local tournaments and won many of them, but his performance at Junior World was more modest: he placed 29th in the 13–14 division at Mission Trails. Sinay treats the result as a reminder that development is uneven and that one tournament cannot define a player. He recounts the long drives, early departures, and waiting that tournament families accept, while acknowledging that Brian's instruction had not yet matched the level available to some competitors. The chapter's personal highlight is meeting Gary Player during the inaugural Toshiba Classic at Newport Beach. Player discussed fitness and practice, signed his book on bunker play, and impressed the family with his discipline and generosity. Brian later shot a remarkable 69 at a junior event, drawing praise from a touring professional. Sinay uses Player's example to emphasize that success involves deliberate preparation and physical care, while also showing how access to role models can inspire a young athlete without guaranteeing what comes next.

Chapter 9: 1996 — Sean O'Hair and John Merrick

At Junior World, Brian placed fifth, narrowly missing another trip to Japan. The chapter introduces John Merrick, a steady competitor whose later professional career included a PGA Tour victory, and Sean O'Hair, who had little junior success at this particular event but later became a tour professional. Their contrasting paths illustrate that junior rankings do not reliably predict eventual professional achievement. Sinay describes O'Hair's difficult relationship with his father, whose intense discipline became publicly controversial, and reflects on the complicated line between support and pressure. Brian finished the season by winning the Southern California Junior Golf Association Tournament of Champions and shot 64 at Newport Beach Country Club. He also played a round with baseball star Reggie Jackson and beat him, earning praise from the former Yankee. These episodes capture a season of strong results while underscoring that individual performances, even impressive ones, are only pieces of a longer development story.

Chapter 10: 1997 — Joining the Likes of Tiger Woods

Brian's freshman year of high school brought national attention. At the Southern Section individual championship, he shot 69 to win, becoming one of the youngest champions and joining a history that included Tiger Woods. The chapter reproduces the Los Angeles Times account of the tournament, which describes the heat, long round, and Brian's steady ball striking. He also earned regional honors, won the Player of the Year awards from local newspapers, and performed strongly in other high school events. Beyond high school, Brian qualified for the U.S. Junior Amateur, advanced to match play, and competed in several national tournaments, including the Independent Insurance Agents Junior Classic. Sinay presents the results as evidence of considerable talent, while noting the expense and effort required to reach elite competitions. The season strengthened Brian's reputation and Stanford prospects, but the memoir makes clear that neither the father nor son was then pursuing a professional-tour career as the overriding goal. Stanford remained the destination that gave the effort its meaning.

Chapter 11: 1998 — Aaron Baddeley and Chasing High School Golf History

Brian continued competing at a high level, finishing second in the Los Angeles City Championship and placing well in high school and national events. He returned to the U.S. Junior Amateur at Conway Farms, advanced to the round of sixteen, and encountered Aaron Baddeley, whose excellent play in difficult wind impressed him. The event gave Brian experience against the country's best juniors and revealed how technical skills—such as controlling shots in wind—could separate players. The chapter also revisits instruction. Sinay questions whether Brian's coach at the time understood the specific swing mechanics Brian needed, especially compared with competitors who had more expert guidance. James Oh won the Junior Amateur, while Baddeley went on to a strong professional career. Their different outcomes again complicate any easy equation between junior wins and later success. Brian's results were substantial, but Sinay's retrospective account suggests that achievement alone could not answer whether Brian had the motivation or preparation to continue toward a professional career.

Chapter 12: 1999 — Sergio Garcia, Ty Tryon, and Taking Down a Tiger Woods' Record

Brian's junior year brought his most celebrated high school performance: a 65 at Canyon Country Club, breaking the Southern Section record of 66 associated with Tiger Woods. The chapter reproduces the Los Angeles Times report, which describes the growing gallery as word spread about Brian's low score. He made eight birdies and one bogey, winning his second section title and establishing a record-breaking moment that delighted his father and local golf community. The season also brought a striking encounter with Sergio Garcia at the Junior Orange Bowl, where Brian was paired with the future star. Garcia drove farther, but

Brian stayed close through his short game and putting. Sinay learned about the importance of lag in the swing and recognized gaps in Brian's instruction. Meanwhile, Stanford coach Wally Goodwin offered Brian a scholarship, then briefly rescinded it before restoring it after a conversation with Brian's friend Travis Whisman. Brian ultimately committed to Stanford. The chapter contrasts the lifelong professional ambition of players such as Garcia and Ty Tryon with Brian's narrower goal: to earn a Stanford education and play golf there.

Chapter 13: 2000 — Dyeing Out to Make Southern California High School History

As a senior, Brian had a chance to win a third high school championship, a feat achieved by only a handful of players, including Tiger Woods. Peter Yoon's newspaper interview revealed a young man who enjoyed golf but did not want it to consume his life: Brian valued time with friends, music, concerts, and activities beyond the course. He had already fulfilled his central ambition by earning admission and a scholarship to Stanford, and he admitted that reaching the goal left him unsure what should come next. He finished seventh in the championship, short of a third title. Sinay explains that he did not fully understand the significance of Brian's comments at the time. He had assumed that earning the scholarship naturally meant competing for Stanford, while Brian's interview suggested that golf was no longer his overriding pursuit. Sinay's letter to Brian before college celebrates their shared memories and the opportunities golf created, but it also urges him to keep practicing and make the most of the team opportunity. In retrospect, the chapter exposes a gap between father and son: the father saw a continuing athletic obligation, while the son may have considered his principal goal achieved.

Chapter 14: 2001 — The Dream Becomes a Nightmare

Brian arrived at Stanford expecting to play under coach Wally Goodwin, who had promised him an opportunity across the full freshman schedule. Instead, Goodwin retired and Jeff Mitchell became the new coach. Brian did not make the fall traveling team, despite his father's understanding that he would play. He was dealing with a neck injury, and in spring qualifying he was again left off the traveling roster after finishing high enough, by his account, to merit consideration. A strong result at a secondary tournament did not lead to encouragement from Mitchell. The family later learned that Brian's attempt to obtain a medical redshirt had not been handled successfully. Brian believed he had been promised a year of eligibility and financial aid in compensation, but the promises did not resolve the problem. Sinay describes his distress as he watched the Stanford golf experience diverge from what he and Brian had imagined. Notes from Brian also report broader dissatisfaction among teammates with the new coach's leadership. The chapter frames the first year as a collision among changed expectations, injury, selection decisions, and a father's belief that Brian's junior record should have earned him more opportunity.

Chapter 15: 2002 — The Nightmare Continues

Brian's sophomore year brought little playing time. He competed in two tournaments hosted at Stanford but finished near the bottom, results his father interpreted as signs of inadequate preparation and fading interest. Sinay struggled to understand why a player with such a strong junior record was no longer competing effectively. He wrote Brian a long letter arguing that a scholarship entails a responsibility to work, manage time, and contribute to the team, while also urging him to consider whether he truly wanted to continue playing golf. The letter reveals both love and pressure. Sinay acknowledges that Brian may no longer want a professional career, yet insists that he should not abandon his talent without trying. Brian, meanwhile, was pursuing a demanding symbolic systems major and had begun to focus more on academic life. The chapter shows how the father's desire for Brian to honor a commitment and the son's own changing priorities were increasingly at odds. Sinay recognizes in hindsight that urging Brian toward a professional path was poorly matched to a young man who was struggling even to remain involved with his college team.

Chapter 16: 2003 — Getting Blindsided by Coach Mitchell

During Brian's junior year, Sinay wrote Stanford athletic administrators to describe what he saw as repeated failures: Brian's junior record had not been adequately considered, his playing opportunities were limited, and the redshirt issue remained unresolved. Brian's own notes describe a meeting in which Mitchell allegedly told him to choose between academics and golf. Brian also reported that after seeking therapy for his neck, he was suspended for missing practice and never returned to the team. These accounts make clear that the memoir's evidence comes partly from Brian's later recollections and is presented from the family's perspective. The conflict culminated in a hearing about Brian's scholarship. Sinay and Brian prepared a case arguing that the coaching process and broken promises had contributed to the situation. At the meeting, the coach and Brian each spoke, and Brian detailed his grievances. The committee later communicated its decision, but for Sinay the emotional outcome was already clear: Brian's college golf career was effectively over. A kind comment from an admissions committee member, recognizing Sinay's support, gave the father a moment of comfort amid the painful realization that the Stanford dream had not unfolded as expected.

Chapter 17: 2004 — No Man's Land

Brian's golf career at Stanford ended before his senior year, and Sinay reflects on the loss as a family experience rather than a single person's failure. He acknowledges his own expectations: he had wanted to see Brian play for Stanford and had promised Goodwin that Brian would keep working hard. At the same time, he recognizes the obstacles Brian faced, including the coaching change, injury, academic demands, and loss of motivation. A graduation letter celebrates Brian's achievement without reopening the golf conflict, and a

poem retraces his childhood and the journey to Stanford. After graduating with a degree in symbolic systems, Brian began working at Google, stayed in California, married, and raised a family. He did not play golf again for fifteen years. Sinay concludes that expectations and reality can diverge, and that a goal may matter even if it is not pursued indefinitely. The chapter's resolution is not a return to competitive golf but a father's gradual acceptance: Brian's Stanford education and adult life remained meaningful achievements even though the anticipated team career never came to pass.

Notable Quotes

> *"“A goal is not always meant to be reached; it often serves simply as something to aim at.”"*

> *"“Setting goals is the first step in turning the invisible into the visible.”"*

> *"“The more I practice, the luckier I get.”"*

> *"“People don't seem to realize how often you have to come in second to finish first. I've never met a winner who hadn't learned how to be a loser.”"*

> *"“The thing with kids is, if they want to grab the gold ring, you have to let them do it and not say anything.”"*

> *"“You've done everything you wanted to do and then reached your goal; from there, it's hard to keep going.”"*

Full Summary

Brian's first years with golf were not part of a plan to make him a professional. I wanted an activity we could enjoy together, and at first it was simply one of several ways he spent time: soccer in the fall, baseball in the spring, and golf whenever there was room between games. He began with a plastic club, batting Wiffle balls around the house, and spent hours putting at Rancho San Joaquin in Irvine. When we moved there in 1985, he was three. By kindergarten, the repeated swings had made hitting real golf balls feel natural, and he already had a feel for putting that would become one of his greatest strengths.

Tiger Woods offered a remarkable contrast. Earl Woods said Tiger watched him hit balls in the garage from his highchair, absorbing the swing before he could walk. Tiger began competing as a toddler and went on to win six Junior World titles, three U.S. Junior Amateurs, three U.S. Amateurs, an NCAA championship, and much more. Brian met Tiger when he was twelve and received the Southern California Junior Golf Association's Player of the Year award. Later, Brian's high-school victories would invite comparisons with Tiger's records, and

he too would want to attend Stanford. But Brian's beginning was different: I had no ambition to prepare him for the tour. I was learning the game alongside him, and golf was still about playing together.

At eight, Brian practiced in the summers and began hitting balls at the range, gradually improving his ball striking through repetition. I did not yet understand how much good instruction mattered. Malcolm Gladwell's ten-thousand-hour rule would later give me one way to think about mastery, but hours alone could not guarantee improvement: a player might repeat the wrong habits. I read instruction books by David Leadbetter, Butch Harmon, and Hank Haney, trying to learn enough to help. I also came to understand how much technique there was to learn in chipping, pitching, bunker play, and putting. Brian's touch on the greens, however, seemed to arrive almost naturally. He could sink putts from all over, without fear, and I came to believe that exceptional putting—part practice, part feel—often separates the best players.

Kevin Na showed how determination and a strong short game could carry a player through difficulty. Brian encountered him in junior tournaments, though he did not see the incident that led to Na's one-year suspension from the Southern California Junior Golf Association. Na used that year to work intensely on his game. After returning, he became a successful junior, turned professional at seventeen without finishing high school, and eventually won five times on the PGA Tour. His career included injuries and a period when he was afraid to begin his swing, a problem he fought through with persistence. He was also an unusually gifted putter. His route differed from Brian's, but he demonstrated that talent was not enough: resolve, skill, and the ability to withstand setbacks mattered too.

When Brian was nine, we joined Dove Canyon Country Club in Coto de Caza, a new Jack Nicklaus course. It gave him access to excellent practice facilities and a demanding course that made him learn how to recover from difficult lies and missed greens. From the red tees, he broke 80 at 5,225 yards. At the club's dedication in November 1991, Nicklaus faced a tree blocking his way on a par five. He sent a five-wood through the Y-shaped opening in its branches, then chipped close and made birdie. Afterward he greeted Brian, told him to keep playing, and signed three things the delighted boy brought over. Another day, we played with Chris Tidland, a former student of mine who had won the Southern California high-school championship and later the NCAA title with Oklahoma State, beating Stanford's team. Tidland became a touring professional and repeatedly tried to secure a lasting place on tour, playing qualifying school thirteen times before injuries changed his game. Watching him showed Brian how a professional behaved on a course, without turning our round into a lesson about becoming one. We also met Phil Mickelson at the halfway house, where he cheerfully signed Brian's scorecard. Mickelson had already won the NCAA individual championship twice and would build an extraordinary career.

In 1991, Brian entered Southern California junior events in the eleven-and-under group, despite being only nine. James Oh, Steve Conway, and Brian shared many of the victories; Hunter Mahan, a year younger, often finished behind them. I encouraged Hunter to keep working on his short game. Soon his father, Monte, moved the family to Texas so Hunter could study with Hank Haney. The investment transformed Hunter's game. He later became an All-American at Oklahoma State, won six times on the PGA Tour, and played in the Ryder Cup. His progress made clear how strongly coaching could shape a talented player, though a good putter was part of his success as well.

Brian's first tournament victory came at Borrego Springs, east of San Diego. On a fiercely windy day, he shot 42 over nine holes and brought home his first trophy. At the Yorba Linda Junior Invitational, one of Southern California's most celebrated events, he narrowly missed the cut. Rather than discouraging him, the competition energized him. The following year, he entered the Junior World Championship in San Diego, where ten-year-olds played at the compact Presidio course: eighteen short par threes, with tiny greens that demanded delicate touch. We made several practice trips before the tournament. Brian finished second, one under par for three rounds, behind James Oh, the only two players to break par.

That finish earned him an all-expenses-paid invitation to The Japan Cup, where top finishers from Junior World met Japanese qualifiers. The American group was welcomed in Nagoya, stayed at a five-star hotel, and played at Fuji Syuga Country Club, a hilly course in August heat and humidity. Sponsors including Toyota, Sony, Honda, and Mizuno supported the event, which was filmed for Japanese television. Brian finished third, behind James and Travis Whisman. Among the players we met was Lorena Ochoa, a ten-year-old from Guadalajara who had won Junior World. She went on to dominate The Japan Cup by ten strokes, then became one of the LPGA's greatest players. Her mother, Marcela Reyes, was always there supporting her. Matthew Rosenfeld, a year younger than Brian, finished ninth; he would win Junior World the next year and later the U.S. Junior Amateur. J. J. Killeen, another San Diego player, finished fourth. He went on to play at TCU, win twice on the Nationwide Tour in 2011, and earn that tour's Player of the Year award.

At eleven, Brian continued winning local events and finished third at Junior World, behind Michael Hastings and ahead of several future golf figures. The previous champion, James Oh, placed fifteenth that year, a reminder that a single tournament could not define a player. James remained a formidable rival, and in the seasons ahead Brian would meet him again, while their paths through junior golf continued to diverge.

In 1994, Brian returned to the San Diego Junior World Golf Championship at Pine Glen, now more familiar with the course and stronger than the year before. He played three outstanding rounds and won the 11–12 division with a total of 164, two over par, finishing just ahead of J. J. Killeen, Travis Whisman, and James Oh. On the final hole, a short par three, Brian struck

his tee shot to within ten feet. As he reached the green, he looked toward his father and silently mouthed, “I won.” James also made three, and the tournament was settled: Brian was a Junior World champion, an achievement shared by golfers such as Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson, and Lorena Ochoa. Yet the victory did not make Brian dream of becoming a professional. Golf was still a game he played, not a career he planned.

A new ambition emerged through Brian’s friendship with Steve Conway, another Irvine junior golfer. The boys spent time together playing golf games and inventing shots with Wiffle balls. One summer, Steve told Brian that his father had attended Stanford. Brian asked where it was, learned about the university, and decided he wanted to go there. He soon wore a Stanford sweatshirt to school. After the Junior World victory, his father encouraged him to write to Stanford coach Wally Goodwin, much as Tiger Woods had done as a young student. Goodwin began following Brian at tournaments, and the boy’s golf acquired a new purpose: earn a scholarship to Stanford, play where Tiger Woods and Tom Watson had played, and get a college education. There was no corresponding plan to reach the PGA Tour.

Brian’s schoolwork gave him a strong foundation for that aim. His parents had deliberately arranged for him and his sister, Jennie, to be among the oldest students in their classes, believing age would help both academically and athletically. They excelled in school, and Brian’s reading ability had been evident from childhood. His parents’ investment of time, travel, and attention in golf now served a goal he had chosen, even as their hopes and effort became deeply entwined with his.

Brian received the Southern California Junior Golf Association’s Player of the Year award, presented by Tiger Woods, then a high-school senior headed for Stanford. That summer he won eight local tournaments and shot one over par from the white tees at Newport Beach Country Club. The following year brought even more victories: he entered roughly twenty local tournaments and won fifteen. At the 1995 Junior World, however, he finished twenty-ninth in a field of 132, five over par. James Oh took second. The result showed how quickly the competition could change; Brian’s junior success did not guarantee that he would lead every field.

That season also brought a personal encounter with Gary Player, who was competing on the senior tour at Newport Beach Country Club. Player, a nine-time major champion known for rigorous fitness and practice, told Brian that his swing looked good and explained why a lean, flexible physique suited golf better than excessive upper-body muscle. His book on bunker play became a reference for father and son. Brian’s father was still trying to learn enough about the game to help him, while recognizing that sound instruction mattered and could be difficult to afford. At a junior championship, Brian won the overall trophy against older players, shooting three-under-par 69 at thirteen. Such performances confirmed his ability, but improvement depended on more than talent or hours of practice.

In 1996, Brian finished fifth at Junior World, one stroke short of qualifying for another trip to Japan. Travis Whisman won, while John Merrick finished ahead of Brian after making a long putt. Merrick’s later career would be modestly successful on the PGA Tour, where his putting helped him win the Los Angeles Open. The same tournament introduced the family to Sean O’Hair, who missed the cut as a fourteen-year-old despite eventually finding success on tour. O’Hair’s father, Mark, was notorious for harsh discipline; after a poor round, he sent his son running for miles. The pressure damaged their relationship, a stark example of how a parent’s investment and expectations can weigh on a young athlete. Brian, meanwhile, won the Southern California Junior Golf Association Tournament of Champions and shot 64 at Newport Beach Country Club. The great baseball player Reggie Jackson invited him for a round. Brian returned saying he had beaten Jackson, who praised him as “a hell of a player.”

Brian’s freshman year of high school, in 1997, produced his first Southern Section championship. At fifteen, he shot three-under-par 69 at Canyon Country Club in Palm Springs, winning by one stroke and becoming the first freshman champion since James Oh. Earlier winners included Tiger Woods. Brian played steadily in brutal heat, hitting ten fairways and sixteen greens, and his victory brought a rush of recognition. He also earned local and county honors, while continuing to play nationally. He qualified for the U.S. Junior Amateur at Aronimink, won his first match, then lost on the nineteenth hole to an older player. He placed fifteenth at the Independent Insurance Agents Junior Classic and sixth at the California Junior Amateur. His results were impressive for his age, but he was not dominating every national field.

The next year, Brian placed fifth in the high-school championship, which James Oh won, and finished fifty-fifth at Junior World. At the U.S. Junior Amateur, he qualified for match play at Stanford and advanced to the quarterfinals before losing to an opponent nearly two years older. James went on to defeat Aaron Baddeley in the final. Baddeley had excelled in fierce wind, using shots Brian had not been taught; the contrast sharpened his father’s awareness that instruction could shape a player’s options. Brian’s game still relied heavily on his short game and exceptional putting, while the family had yet to find the right professional guidance for his swing. His junior achievements remained substantial, but the paths of talented peers were already separating, with no simple formula linking early victories to later success.

In 1999, Brian returned to Canyon Country Club hoping to win a second Southern California high school championship. After qualifying despite a modest 76, he shot a seven-under-par 65, breaking Tiger Woods’s tournament record of 66. Eight birdies and a steady round drew a growing gallery as word spread. His teammate Ron Won shot 66, and James Oh finished at 67, but Brian took the title. The achievement was extraordinary, yet his reaction afterward was subdued. When his father asked if he enjoyed winning, Brian replied, “It’s okay, Dad.” That answer hinted at a truth Richard Sinay was only beginning to recognize: Brian’s ambition was not to build a life around golf. It was to reach Stanford.

A summer pairing with Sergio Garcia at the Junior Orange Bowl made the difference between talent and instruction especially visible. Brian kept pace through his putting and short game, finishing the first round just one stroke behind, though Sergio's drives traveled twenty or thirty yards farther. A spectator, University of North Carolina coach John Inman, explained the gap: Sergio had more "lag," a delayed release that helped him deliver power to the ball. Brian had never been taught that essential element of the swing. He made the tournament cut and enjoyed talking with Sergio, but the experience reinforced Sinay's growing conviction that a player's development depends on skilled instruction, not merely practice. Sergio went on to win, while Brian's strong junior record could not erase the technical disadvantage.

Another young player at the Western Junior illustrated the risks of rushing toward professional golf. Ty Tryon, coached by David Leadbetter from an early age, was three years younger than Brian and already attracting attention. He turned professional at sixteen, signed a major endorsement deal, and briefly qualified for the PGA Tour. But he struggled to make cuts, battled mononucleosis, and soon found himself far from the success many had predicted. Sinay saw in Tryon, and in other young prodigies, a warning: exceptional junior results do not guarantee a lasting professional career, and a parent's enthusiasm can propel a child toward a path for which the child may not yet be ready.

Brian's own goal was narrower. Stanford offered him a sixty-percent golf scholarship, then withdrew it a month or two later, for reasons the family never learned. Brian's friend and fellow recruit Travis Whisman appealed directly to coach Wally Goodwin, emphasizing how long Brian had worked toward the opportunity. Goodwin reconsidered and reinstated the offer, later increasing it to seventy percent. During a campus visit, he told Brian he expected him to play in all eleven tournaments in his freshman year. The family was relieved, though Sinay believed the scholarship should have been larger. Brian had achieved the aim he had fixed on since sixth grade, but no one paused to ask what he hoped to pursue once he arrived.

A newspaper interview before Brian's senior-year championship exposed that uncertainty. He described golf as his top priority but said he needed time away from it and did not want it to become his whole life. He enjoyed friends, concerts, basketball, and the freedom to be different, including bleaching his hair and wearing cargo pants. He admitted that winning a Stanford scholarship had brought a touch of depression: once he had accomplished his one real goal, he wondered what came next. In his final high-school year, he came close to a third title but did not win it. Meanwhile, Goodwin retired, leaving the family's plan for Stanford to depend on a new coach, Jeff Mitchell, hired despite most of the team favoring another candidate.

Brian arrived in the fall of 2000 carrying both a neck injury from a car accident and a history of junior success. Yet he did not play in the fall tournaments. He finished second in a junior-squad event, but Mitchell offered little acknowledgment. In the spring, Brian placed high

enough in qualifying to expect selection for tournaments, including one in Hawaii, but was left off the traveling team. Mitchell had said freshmen who qualified well should receive consideration because they had less experience on the Stanford course; Brian felt that promise had been ignored. When Brian asked about a medical redshirt year, Mitchell and an athletic-department administrator assured him it could be arranged. The injury, however, predated his arrival, making him ineligible. The promised alternative financial aid also failed to materialize, leaving the family to cover his senior year.

The conflict deepened in Brian's sophomore year. He did not make the traveling team and played only in two home tournaments as an individual, finishing near the bottom. Sinay, alarmed by his son's withdrawal and by the loss of playing opportunities, wrote to him that a scholarship meant an obligation to contribute, not simply a reward for past achievements. He urged Brian to set new goals, work harder, and consider professional golf, though Brian had never shared that ambition. His father's plea reflected a genuine belief in Brian's ability, but it also revealed how differently they understood the scholarship: Sinay saw a responsibility to compete, while Brian's overriding purpose had already been fulfilled.

In his junior year, Brian says Mitchell told him to choose between academics and golf, a demand that struck him as incompatible with Stanford's mission. Brian also recalled the coach's disrespectful treatment of teammate Del DeWindt, who eventually quit. After Brian sought therapy for his neck without promptly notifying an assistant coach, Mitchell suspended him from the team for the rest of the year. Sinay appealed to Stanford's athletic committee, arguing that Brian had been denied chances to play, that the redshirt had been mishandled, and that the coach had failed to support him. At the hearing, Brian presented his own case; the committee ultimately considered both accounts. For Sinay, the meeting brought the collapse of years of hope. Yet, looking back, he recognized that the situation was not solely the coach's doing: Brian's motivation had waned, the father and son had not communicated honestly, and their expectations were not the same.

There was no senior season on the golf team. Brian completed his demanding symbolic-systems degree, and his father sent him a graduation letter focused on pride rather than golf. After Stanford, Brian stayed in California, joined Google, and built a life there with his wife, Maeve, and their children. He did not pick up a golf club for fifteen years. Sinay came to see that the dream had contained different meanings for father and son: Brian wanted to reach Stanford, while his father imagined him playing there. The scholarship marked the achievement of one goal, but it could not supply the next one, and neither talent nor years of family sacrifice could make Brian want a future in golf that he had never chosen.

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