

GOLF PETER YOON

Look for Woman Driver

The big day is two weeks away, but **Lee Brandon's** competitive juices already are beginning to boil.

As defending women's champion in the World Long Drive Championships, all eyes will be on her and opponents will be gunning for her.

But Brandon, 40, said she isn't nervous. She said she's just happy to be competing and something tells you it isn't some tired cliché.

Brandon is happy to be alive.

During her junior year in high school in 1979, Brandon nearly died after she accidentally put her left arm through a glass window. The glass sliced open an artery and nearly severed her arm at the elbow.

Brandon's heart stopped on the operating table as doctors worked to reattach the arm, but they managed to restart it and saved her arm.

That's the same arm she used to launch a drive 291 yards 3 inches last October to win the long drive title by more than six yards.

"I never would have thought I could win this thing," said Brandon, who at 5 feet 11 with golden hair has earned the nickname "Blonde Bomber." "Heck, I used to make fun of golfers."

Before the accident, Brandon was an aspiring Olympian. She was nationally ranked in the discus and shotput, but it took seven years to regain feeling in her arm and she gave up dreams of competing.

She turned to coaching and in 1988 became an assistant strength and conditioning coach for the New York Jets. She was the first female strength coach in the NFL.

After that, Brandon started a private strength and conditioning practice in Brentwood and took up golf to help a client in 1997. She took lessons but didn't own a driver until her instructor suggested she try the long drive competition.

"He was like, 'The woman who won last year hit it 249 yards, you can do that with a four-wood,'" Brandon said.

And thus, at 39, Brandon once again became a competitive athlete.

"It's funny how the universe twists things around," she said. "I mean, my life as a competitor was over at age 17. I felt like I lost my



BRIAN WAI-SKI / Los Angeles Times

Lee Brandon won the 2001 Long Drive Championship with a blast of 291 yards, but she says she has hit it 347 yards on the course.

achieved a lot of joy in coaching and creating champions, but never thought I'd be one again. How many women at age 39 think about competing in anything?"

Brandon is serious about defending her title. She has trained hard over the last year, adding seven to eight mph to her swing speed, which is now 111-117 mph. (Tiger Woods is about 125). Her career long drive in competition is 327 yards, but she says she has hit one 347 on the course.

Still, Brandon, a 15 handicap, doesn't want to put too much pressure on herself to win at the finals Oct. 16-19 in Mesquite, Nev. She has only one goal.

"I just want to hit six balls flush," she said. "A lot of competitors are out there swinging for the fences, I'm just trying to hit the ball. Other than that, I'm just