



A taste of tour life

Why a pro-am serves up anticipation, exhilaration and humiliation—for us and, occasionally, for them **By David Owen**

SCOTT McCARRON TOOK HIS FAMILY WITH HIM TO THE 1996 LINCOLN-Mercury Kapalua International. It was just his second year on tour and he was concerned about the cost of the trip, so he was happy to learn that a “professional-amateur” party had been scheduled for Tuesday night—a free meal and an evening’s entertainment for himself and his entourage.

At the party, however, McCarron noticed with growing unease that he seemed to be the only professional in attendance. Suddenly, he understood why: The event wasn’t a friendly get-together for competitors and fans, as he had assumed; it was the “pairings party,” at which teams of amateurs would choose their professional partners for the following day’s pro-am. “I had flashbacks to kickball in elementary school,” he said later. He hid in the bar with his father, returning only to beg mercy from the members of the next-to-last amateur team—who, after a lengthy, whispered deliberation, grudgingly agreed to pick him.

McCarron told this story (and got big laughs) at another pairings party, the one held before the pro-am at the Western Open last July. Once again, he was the

Illustration by Darren Thompson

only pro in attendance, although this time he had an official function, as one of the evening's emcees. I was there, too, because I had pretty much begged Golf Digest—a "presenting sponsor" of the Western—to let me play.

The selection of pros took place after dinner, when McCarron picked our partners for us, by blindly drawing their names from a bowl—a humiliation-proof method, perhaps devised by him. We all wanted Tiger, of course, or, barring him, Phil Mickelson. Both of those guys were still available when my team's number came up, so my heart was pounding as McCarron unfolded our assignment. And, sure enough, believe it or not—I swear the system wasn't rigged—we got J.P. Hayes.

Fantasy (ours) vs. dread (theirs)

Every tournament on the PGA Tour except the Players Championship, the four World Golf Championships and the four majors has at least one pro-am. (The LPGA, Nationwide and Champions tours have pro-ams, too.) Most pro-ams are one-day events, and most are played on Wednesday of tournament week, the day before the real competition begins. The amateur participants are usually local fat cats—the entry fee for the Western pro-am was \$4,500, and it was nonrefundable in the event of bad weather—plus a handful of freeloaders (like me) who are tight with one of the sponsors.

For a typical golf fan, playing in a pro-am is a fantasy come true. It's a chance to spend five hours getting on the nerves of a real tour player, and it provides numerous opportunities to obtain personalized mementos that can later be sold on eBay. Participants also get free stuff—in this instance, a dorky-looking but possibly somewhat expensive leather briefcase, half a dozen golf balls, a golf glove and a small box containing two of the three liquid ingredients of a cocktail called the Ultimate Cosmopolitan.

The excitement felt by the amateurs in any pro-am is almost exactly offset by the dread felt by the professionals, most of whom would prefer to be mowing their lawn, if not their neighbor's lawn. But the tour requires the top pros to take part, mainly because pro-ams generate favorable PR and make tournament sponsors happy. Outwardly, at least, most pros try to be good sports. A few, inexplicably, even seem

to flourish: Five of Mark O'Meara's first eight tour victories came at tournaments with multi-day pro-ams.

To be quite honest, when the Western pairings were announced on Tuesday night, I was a little unclear about the difference between J.P. Hayes and J.L. Lewis—or, for that matter, between J.L. Lewis and J.J. Henry. On the tee the next morning, though, I recognized Hayes almost immediately. (His name was printed in large capital letters on the side of his bag.) I also met the three other amateurs in our fivesome: Bill, who is the CEO of a company that makes "liquefied gas aerosol propellants and foam blowing agents" (handicap: 8); Kenny, a youngish Eurodollar-options trader (11);

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and Norm, a stockbroker approaching retirement (11). My handicap was 13.

Our first hole was the 10th on Dubsdread, which is the best of the four excellent courses at Cog Hill. The 10th is a short par 4—380 yards for Hayes and 329 for us. The fairway angles to the left and is flanked on both sides by leafy trees. Hayes hit driver, bombing his ball over the inside corner of the dogleg, leaving him less than a wedge to the flag. Then Norm hit the first of his many perfect drives up the middle, Bill hit a decent drive to the left side of the fairway, Kenny pulled his tee shot slightly, into the rough on the left, and I hit a solid 5-wood, giving me 125 yards to the flag. I followed my excellent tee shot with a smooth 9-iron, holding my finish, pro-style, as my ball soared high, landed on the green and stopped 15 to 20 feet from the hole. Walking up to mark my ball, I twirled my putter in my right hand and made various good-natured remarks to my caddie, blithely unaware that I had just hit my last good shot of the day.

How Tiger and other pros see it

The Western Open was first played in 1899 and is the oldest regular event on the PGA Tour. It was created, and is still run, by the Western Golf Association, which is 17 years older than the PGA and just five years younger than the U.S. Golf Association. The WGA's headquarters—in Golf, Ill.—also houses the offices of the Evans Scholars Foundation, the country's largest privately funded college-scholarship program and the beneficiary of the pro-am I played in. More than 800 caddies currently attend college on Evans Scholarships. Fifty-two of them worked our pro-am as caddies for the pros.

My own caddie, Ben, was a high-school senior and a regular summer caddie at another club in the area. He told me that he hopes to qualify for an Evans Scholarship when he graduates, and that his ambition is to become a high school shop teacher—an occupation for which he had been preparing himself by learning to use a table saw to launch short lengths of 2-by-4 at a Volkswagen Beetle being dissected on the far side of his school's shop.

Ben was a terrifically helpful caddie, but even he was unable to transform my over-the-top slash into a convincing imitation of a swing. My closest near-contribution to the team occurred when, by weakly missing a six-foot putt for net birdie, I conceivably helped Kenny sink a three-foot putt along more or less the same line. Other than that, I had the sort of round that makes you wonder whether God hasn't suddenly decided to turn you into a better person, by making your life miserable.

The stars of our team were Kenny and Bill. Kenny sank almost everything inside 10 feet or so, and Bill, at several crucial moments, was somehow able to hit his 3-wood about as far as Hayes could hit his driver. The two of them carried our team onto the first page of the electronic leader board and then to a final score of 15 under par—an awesome performance, which, if it had been one stroke better, would have vaulted us into a three-way match of cards for fifth place, out of the 26 groups with morning tee times. (The field was divided into morning and afternoon divisions.)

The trophies were handed out at lunch, in a huge tent not far from the 18th green. Nobody, not even the winners, paid attention to the presentation, so I left my table

to talk to two of the four guys who had played with Tiger. (They were easy to spot, because they were smiling so broadly that their eyes were almost squeezed shut.) One told me he had been too excited to sleep the night before and had passed the long hours till dawn by calling everyone he could think of. Both said that Tiger had been an extraordinarily gracious, friendly, talkative and amusing playing partner, and that he had signed as many autographs and posed for as many photographs as they and their friends had wanted. They also said that Tiger, disgusted with himself after pulling a drive into the trees to the left of the fairway on 13, had asked his Evans Scholar caddie to finish the hole for him. "The caddie wedged Tiger's ball onto the green," one said, "and then Tiger carried the bag himself and handed the caddie his putter! It was amazing!"

After lunch, I reclined on a grassy slope between the grandstand and the 18th green and watched a few of the afternoon groups finish. From my distant vantage point, the advance of amateurs down the final fairway looked as random as Brownian motion: dark figures appeared over the crest of the hill, then zigzagged vaguely toward me, looking for balls, looking for yardage markers, beckoning to one another, their crisscrossings punctuated at unpredictable intervals by shots skulled into the pond. I had a sudden inkling of what a pro-am looks like to a pro, and I felt ashamed.

When a game becomes a job

The next day, I returned to Cog Hill to lend comradely moral support to Hayes as he played his first round in the real tournament. His tee time was 1:09, exactly the same as Tiger's—but Hayes was assigned to

the first tee (with Justin Leonard and Stuart Appleby) while Woods was assigned to the 10th (with Chris Smith and Cameron Beckman). Woods, who would end up winning the tournament, influences golf spectators the way a black hole influences cosmic dust: When he emerged from the driving range, at about 12:45, what appeared to be the entire human population of northeastern Illinois began drifting inexorably toward him.

Over on hole No. 1, in contrast, the crowd of spectators quickly reduced itself to a handful of friends, relatives and stubborn contrarians. If Hayes, Leonard and Appleby had changed into Halloween costumes after hitting their second shots, the scene would have gone unrecorded, because there were no cameras within miles. I walked with Hayes' completely charming wife, Laura, who was pregnant with their second child; Amanda Leonard (who would give birth a couple of months later); Ashley Appleby, and a few of Hayes' relatives, who were visiting from Wisconsin—about the same turnout you would expect for the final round of a club championship.

I had always thought that the life of a tour player's wife must be terribly solitary, but as I talked with Laura I realized that she, Amanda and Ashley have a much more complicated and fulfilling social existence on the road than do their husbands—who, after all, spend most of their daily allotment of interpersonal quality time discussing yardages with their caddies. Out on the fairway, the men looked grimly industrious and isolated—kind of lonely, in fact—as they strode along in silence, assiduously trying to avoid making the kinds of mistakes that might cost them a paycheck for the week. (As things turned out, only Leonard would make the

cut.) On the other side of the ropes, meanwhile, we were having a swell time. Amanda had snapshots, Ashley told me about a trip to the south of France that she and Appleby were going to take, and I chatted about golf with one of Hayes' brothers. And to beat the heat, we all drank water (at \$3 a bottle) just like it was water.

Nongolfers joke about how boring golf looks on television, but TV actually makes tournaments seem more exciting than they are, because it focuses on leaders and stars, and because the camera doesn't linger once a shot has been hit. If you've attended a tournament in person, though, you know that most of any professional golf event consists of absolutely nothing—like a fireworks display at which the rockets go off 10 minutes apart. Even if you're following Tiger in one of his thrilling assaults on a major title, you have more than enough time between strokes to read the newspaper and get caught up on your bills.

Weekend golfers reflexively envy tour pros, figuring that playing golf for a living must be the coolest job there is. As I watched Hayes, Leonard and Appleby grinding their way around Dubsdread, though, I reflected that golf the way the pros play it is actually much less fun than golf the way you and I play it. The pros don't have nassaus or presses or member-guests, for example, and they can't drink beer while they play, and they don't get dots for birdies, greenies, sandies, barkies, Arnies, woodsies or wetsies, and nobody ever lets them have a do-over.

It's the pros who lead lives of quiet desperation, in other words—not us. If they hit a ball out-of-bounds, the other guys in their foursome never say, "Aw, forget it, just drop one up by the tree." And nobody ever hooks them in the crotch from behind with a 2-iron as they're getting ready to play a shot. They have to hit practice balls and lift weights and take vitamins and live in hotels and go to bed on time and worry about telling their wives they've been demoted to the Nationwide Tour. What kind of a life is that? It sounds nothing like the game that you and I play; in fact, it sounds suspiciously like a job.

When the whole thing was over, Hayes even had to write thank-you notes to the four guys who'd ruined his Wednesday morning—although the handwriting on mine looked suspiciously like his wife's. 🍷

Pro-am dos and don'ts

Fulton Allem: I've had some beauts over the years. It kills me when guys try to beat me. I laugh out loud.

Tiger Woods: If you're out of the hole, pick up. I do that all the time.

Corey Pavin: Three words: better course management. And don't hit driver just because I do.

David Gossett: Take a chill pill. We don't care how you swing.

Dan Forsman: Don't come up to a pro and say how well you're doing. That's almost always the kiss of death. And we're competing for our livelihood, so we don't need a lot of rah-rah. Until the last putt is holed on 18, it doesn't matter. Then afterward, high-five and go have a soda pop.

Tom Lehman: A well-known politician kept walking in my line. I didn't voice my displeasure—I just didn't vote for him.