Medinah baked, pros half-baked

I
t was so hot on Aug. 13 — the Friday of the PGA Championship at Medinah (Ill.) Country Club No. 3 course — that the table that warm-ish West Palm Beach winter evening was my nephew (an aspiring young assistant pro who worked summers at one of Friel's courses) and an older gentleman, whose name escapes me, but who apparently enjoyed considerable success on the New England golf scene some 50 years earlier.

I knew Mister Friel was battling cancer, but he was still an energetic and delightful dinner companion. He was a man who owned a dozen courses, had played in the PGA Championship, and won a number of professional tournaments throughout New England. By all accounts, he was still shooting several strokes under his age.

Yet as I directed questions at him, giving him every opportunity to put himself on the back regarding his golfing and entrepreneurial accomplishments, he continually deflected the attention toward the older gentlemen across the table. "I wish I could have seen him play," Friel said on several occasions.

That told me a lot about the man. My nephew and I delighted in the older gentleman's company; in their stories, in their camaraderie. By the end of the evening I found myself calling him "Mister Friel," just as my nephew had been doing from the outset; just as the people in the pro shop at White Mountain Golf Club in Ashland, N.H., called him on the second occasion Mister Friel and I met; just as Southglen Woods superintendent Jeff Brown (see story on next page) continually referred to him during our phone interviews.

Mister Friel attracted the kind of respect and admiration from those around him that just a few seem to draw these days — Mister Jones, Mister Williams, Mister Jemsek, Mister Wadsworth. Those who have had the pleasure of meeting these gentlemen are the richer for it.

The 5.4 million avid golfers (25-plus rounds per year) spent an average $3,339 on their chosen sport in 1998, while golfers as a whole spent $30 billion, according to National Golf Foundation figures (see story page 3). The average superintendent earns $53,205 annually (see story page 1). Wykagyl Golf Club Director of Golf Steven Rinnetti said he doesn't know a superintendent in the Metropolitan New York area making under $60,000.

Pebble Beach Co. recently sold for more than $800 million and green fees at Pebble Beach Golf Links are running $325 a round. Kind of hard to believe those who claim the "golf industry is in trouble, the bubble has burst, the boom is over, etc., etc., etc."

Talk about your hard-working guys. Robbie Hellstrom, president of RJH Golf Course Management Services (see story page 27), is currently working three to five days a week as course consultant at Sugarloaf Golf Club in Cabassett Valley, Maine. Every week he makes the 10-hour round-trip drive from there to his home outside Montreal, where he consults two days a week for ski industry giant Intrawest on its two courses at Mt. Tremblant and two more days a week at another Montreal course, Vallee des Fort, which is building a second 18 holes.

In his spare time he is raising four children aged 1 to 7. His philosophy. "We're here for a short time, so let's have a good time." I kind of like that.

Pinehurst — before and after... truly

THE REAL DEAL

Unfortunately error in our last issue resulted in the same "before" photographs being placed twice. We want to show our readers what we really wanted to impress them with in the September issue.

The inset shows the gallery area between the 14th green and 15th tee at Pinehurst No. 2 following the U.S. Open on June 23. The larger photo shows how superintendent Paul Jett and his crew had the area looking just two weeks later, on July 6. We apologize to Mr. Jett and the Pinehurst staff.