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# Derek Florian

## 1974-2005

### “My Best Friend”

It all started eight years ago when we worked together at Prairie Landing Golf Club. I had just finished getting my degree from Rutgers, while Derek had one more year to go at Kishwaukee for his and was working as an intern. We started spending a lot of time together outside of work and I remember driving with my wife out to his house in Sycamore many a time to hang out with Derek and Jennifer. We had never had a reason to go to Sycamore before! We would have dinner, play euchre and consume way too many beverages most of the time. The following year, we were both assistants and worked very well together. Too well together at times—I’m sure we drove Tony Kalina nuts—we were like “two peas in a pod.” Derek and Jennifer ended up purchasing a townhouse on the same street as my wife and I. This meant the start of the “car pool” to work: jamming out to our favorite tunes on the way, putting in a hard day’s work, and then a stop for cold beer on the way home to try and make sense of it all—life was great. He drove one week and I the next. At the time he had a purple Civic and I a 12-year-old ’86 Escort with 112k miles. Boy, how times have changed!

Our career paths seemed to follow one another over the years until we joined up again working for the City of Aurora. This gave us the opportunity to take our relationship to the next level. We both loved what we did and worked for the same employer, which enabled us to share our daily experiences with someone who cared and understood. We kept in touch with each other throughout the day, each and every day. It would start with a call around 6 a.m. after we got our crews out the door. We would call to see what the other had planned for the day on the course, work out some equipment swapping, or learn if our paths might cross

during the day. There was always an afternoon call to see if, when and where we were going for that “cold one” after work. We would argue who called who more, and sometimes would see which one of us could hold off making “the call” the longest. One of us would break down by 9:30 a.m. When it came time for monthly meetings, if we weren’t playing together, we were at least traveling together.

Derek’s dedication to his golf course was unquestionable. Even with the year we had this year, not a blade of grass suffered at Fox Valley Golf Club, which was remarkable given what he had to work with. He gave it his all and then some, even at the expense of his family at times. There were times when his dedication made me feel guilty that I wasn’t as dedicated. When we talked on weekend afternoons, I would be coming home from squeezing in some time with my family at the zoo, birthday parties or a family gathering before heading back to work. Derek would have already been at work for hours and would give me an update on what was going on at his place. To the common golfer, Derek’s extra efforts went unnoticed, but he did it for himself. He was a perfectionist!

Last summer we had celebrated a couple of milestone birthdays, his 30th and my 40th. That celebration went on all year. Derek was instrumental in helping me break in my finished basement, which was completed last fall. We would put on some tunes, talk shop and play pool for hours. He had told me back in our days at Prairie Landing that I was a great guy to know, but that I didn’t give many people the chance. Derek took the time to get to know me and I let him in.

We never talked specifics, but Derek believed that he wasn’t going to live a full life on account of his family history. The way he got worked up about his golf course,



especially this summer on account of the weather and lack of water, and me having a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other while he was telling me this, I usually wasn't in the position to disagree with him. Neither of us had ever mentioned him only living a half-life. As Derek was a young guy and new superintendent, I always thought it would only be a matter of time before he settled down and learned to work smarter, not harder, not trying to do everything himself.

Derek was never shy on showing his affection, especially towards other guys. It is safe to say he definitely had kissed more different men in his life than women. I guess it was his way of showing that you were special to him. At gatherings like parties or golf league, it wasn't uncommon for someone to get bear-hugged and kissed on the cheek from Derek after he had five or six beers. I fell victim so many times that I stopped counting or putting up resistance.

The time when I get tearful the most (such as while I'm writing this) is when I think of the effect he had on my son, Aiden. Derek loved him like he were his own and they had a lot of good times horsing around together. Aiden misses him but does not really understand. My wife now has concerns that I have the energy to go on looking after two families and two golf courses. Even though one of those responsibilities will change in a month or two, I have no question that Derek would not want it any other way and would be there for my family and their needs. This tragedy has been an experience that will affect my family and life forever. I could babble on enough about Derek to fill a book, but it would not mean anything to anyone but me. With all the time we spent together, we were never able to make sense of it all. What happened to Derek doesn't make sense, but I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to spend the time I did with him.

REST IN PEACE, MY FRIEND!

—Todd Schmitz



Todd Schmitz and Derek Florian.

I have been searching my mind for an appropriate epitaph for my buddy Derek. My first thoughts were to come up with something amusing (as I am usually inclined to hide my true emotions with humor) such as "Derek Florian—Great guy, lousy driver," or some such thing. However, after talking with Jennifer, Derek's wife, who informed me that HE was the GOOD driver in the family—my thoughts turned more to concern for the safety of those he left here on this earth. I hope I don't sound crass, but when I think of Derek—of the day he came to Aurora Country Club to interview for the assistant superintendent's job, of the times we played golf together and of the times we blabbed our voices hoarse on the radio or phone—I can't help but start giggling. See, that's the legacy Derek left with me. He made me laugh harder than anyone I have ever known.

Derek was THAT GUY. The guy you gravitated toward when he entered the room. The guy who was at the center of the loudest guffaws in the bar. He had Chris Farley down pat. Billy Bob in *Sling Blade*? Did him better than Billy Bob himself, mmm hmm. He even did a damn good Schmitz (did you know that, Todd?). And the reason he could bring a bar room to its knees in laughter? It's the same reason why people loved him so much. The same reason why his golf course received such raves. The same reason he had the best lawn in his subdivision. And the reason why his career was heading for the stars: Derek threw his entire being into everything he did. There was no half-assed effort when Derek was involved, just full-throttle, pedal-to-the-metal, balls-out effort and dedication. He was overdrive personified.

Well, I miss Derek Florian now. He was too young to be taken, and I feel—as all of us who knew him feel—that I've been cheated out of many years of laughter and friendship. I miss our golf games where nothing is sacred and beer cans are boobytrapped to leak on shirts, bags are unstrapped so they topple out onto fairways, legs are maimed by the swing of a driver, and my shoes get filled with ketchup and mustard. You had to be there—it really was fun. I miss Fridays in the Schmitz basement (though I only made a few). I miss hearing him freak out about the one blade of grass he lost all summer.

So yeah, I'm sad about Derek's passing, and I'm angry that one of the best people I've ever known was taken away from those of us who loved him. But, you know, when I'm sitting in my car alone at a stoplight, or when I'm sitting on a sprayer alone at the golf course and I start thinking about my buddy Derek, I still giggle. I think of his red face and his infectious personality and I just giggle like a schoolgirl. Then I think that, given time to heal, we who feel his loss most will be fine. Because, you see, I know that he's fine—he's still making us laugh, for cryin' out loud.

—John Gurke

