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## NOONAN'S CRUSADE

**G**olf course owner Dan Rooney loves the business but frets about the little things that keep golfers happy at Grand Haven Golf Course near Muskegon, Mich. He's a PGA of America member who played on a few minitours after his college golf career at the University of Kansas.

Rooney is your typical young golf course operator ... except in his spare time he flies one of the world's most sophisticated warplanes and already has done two tours in Iraq where his job was to scream through the skies at 800 mph to protect the good guys on the ground and, when necessary, drop bombs on the bad guys. Not so typical after all.

These days, Rooney splits his time between Michigan, where he and his dad, John Rooney, Ph.D, own Grand Haven, and his home in Tulsa, Okla., where he spends 10 days a month as an F-16 jockey in the 125th Fighter Squadron of the Oklahoma Air National Guard. He likely will go back into combat in a year. "I'm a lifer," he says. "I have 32 of the greatest guys in the world in my unit. When they go, I want to go, too."

Rooney fell in love with golf as a kid thanks to his dad – an avid player and now-retired university professor who also happens to be an expert on the demographics of golf and other sports (see the profile on page 32). But he also felt the pull of flying: "I was always one of those kids who stopped in his tracks and looked up every time I heard the sound of a plane."

He spent a few years living out of his car and humping around to minitour events in places such as Rapid City, S.D., and Duluth, Minn. He was torn between trying to make it to golf's big show and pursuing his big dream of flying jets for the country. He finally put his Tour aspirations aside, joined the Air National Guard in 1998 and earned his wings two years later. Since then, he's earned the rank of captain and the respect of everyone who knows him in both vocations. And get this: His nickname when flying is Noonan, as in Caddyshack.

So, great guy, great patriot, great story, great nickname ... that's enough, right? Nope. The really interesting thing is Rooney wants to do something special for the families of his fellow servicemen who didn't return from Iraq. It all started last year on a stormy night on what should have been a routine commercial flight from Chicago to Grand Rapids, Mich.

"I had just gotten back from Iraq and was already feeling like I was stuck on the sidelines and wanted to do something. When I got on the plane, I noticed a guy in first class in full Army dress and thought, 'Cool, they upgraded a GI.' Then, the pilot announced we had a hero on board. But, it wasn't the guy in first class. It was the remains of another soldier, Brock, in a coffin in the cargo area. The soldier in first class was Brock's

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brother who was escorting his body home.

"When we got to Grand Rapids, they asked everyone to stay on board so they could take Brock's body off first. We all watched through the windows. They had an honor guard and his family was there, including his 4-year-old son. There it was ... the flag-covered coffin ... the whole deal. I cried thinking about what it would be like for his family and all the other families."

I cried, too, as Rooney told me what he witnessed, and I cried later on thinking about how that same scene has played out almost 3,500 times at other airports in the past four years.

But tears won't help that 4-year-old boy whose dad gave his life for our nation and us. Love, support and money will help that child, and the thousands more like him who face a future without a parent and, often, without the financial wherewithal to achieve the American dream that parent died to defend.

That's why Rooney launched the Fallen Heroes Foundation, a first-of-its-kind national effort within the golf business to provide college scholarships and other support for the children of servicemen and women killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. What started as a simple benefit tournament at Grand Haven last year is growing into something huge for the entire golf community. "It's like a wildfire," Rooney says. "Everyone I talk to wants to help."

With commitments of support already in place from several of golf's major associations and Golf Digest, Rooney wants to make Sept. 1 Patriot Day within the golf industry. The idea is for every golfer who plays on Patriot Day to donate \$1 per round or make a contribution to the foundation. Corporate and individual donations are welcome. When I mentioned there are many patriotic superintendents and turf companies who want to help, he said, "Oh my gosh. I never even thought about that!"

Rooney believes the golf community can raise at least \$2 million for those children this year. Think about that for a minute. Sure, we can donate golf clubs to troops overseas, we can put magnetic ribbons on the backs of our trucks, and we can all say we support the troops; or, we can do something that really matters. We can make sure these kids have better lives.

The Fallen Heroes Foundation isn't so much a program but a call to action. It's our chance to let the nation know the golf business cares passionately about the people who take care of us. Right now, it's Noonan's crusade. Let's join him and make it ours, too. **GCI**

*To find out more about the Fallen Heroes Foundation, visit [www.fallenheroesfoundation.com](http://www.fallenheroesfoundation.com).*