Off The Fringe

He Needs a Golf Script

'HOOSIERS' STAR SHELVES PGA CAREER TO RETURN TO ACTING

By Larry Aylward, Editor

It makes sense that Maris Valainis, the actor who portrayed high-school basketball phenom Jimmy Chitwood in the 1986 film *Hoosiers*, could star as a rookie golfer on the verge of helping the United States win the Ryder Cup. Valainis, after all, can hit greens like he hit jump shots in *Hoosiers*, one of the all-time great sports flicks.

The stage is set for that to happen. The 37-year-old Valainis, a scratch golfer, was recently laid off from his job as golf pro and general manager of Rancho San Joaquin GC in Irvine, Calif., and returned to acting. Valainis has an agent and is looking for work.

Remember the pivotal scene in *Hoosiers* when Chitwood's coach, Norman Dale (Gene Hackman), calls the final play with the 1952 Indiana state basketball crown on the line? His team, the Hickory Huskers, is down by one with only seconds left. Dale tells the players they're going to use their star player, Chitwood, as a decoy and someone else is going to take the last shot. Then Chitwood lifts his head, looks his coach squarely in the eyes and says, "I'll make it." If you're a *Hoosiers* fan, you know the rest of the story.
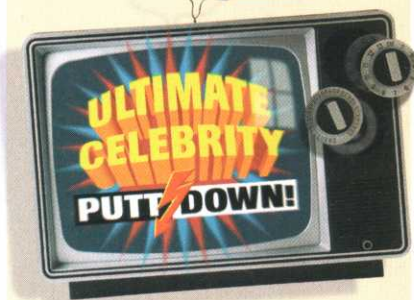
Can't you see a cool and collective Valainis starring in a similar role as a golfer? There he is, lining up a 40-foot putt to win the Ryder Cup. He turns to his nerve-wracked teammates and whispers, "I'll make it."

Valainis, who grew up in Indianapolis, started out as a golfer, not an actor. The golf bug bit when he was 8 years old when he and his brother began caddying and playing. His passion for the game explains his 1-handicap.

But Valainis' life changed when he was a college student in Indianapolis in the mid-'80s. He was playing hoops on a Monday night at a local school when the casting director for *Hoosiers* spotted him and asked him to audition for a role. Valainis had no acting experience, but he could shoot the rock.

He excelled in his role as Chitwood, and *Hoosiers* was a hit. Hence, the acting bug bit Valainis, who moved to California and had bit parts in a few films and TV shows before quitting the

Hollywood scene and returning to golf.

In the early '90s, Valainis took a job as the head pro and assistant manager at Casta del Sol GC in Mission Viejo. He spent the last few years at Rancho San Joaquin GC.

Valainis says he treasures his golf career, and he holds superintendents in high regard. "They're some of the most important people at golf courses," he says.

Valainis still laces up his Chuck Taylors and plays in local leagues. Sometimes other players look at him and say, "Aren't you Jimmy Chitwood?" PGA Tour player Mike Sposa told Valainis he watches *Hoosiers* to inspire him if he's in contention in a tournament.

Valainis isn't tired of the attention and loves to talk about *Hoosiers*, which he says is the *The Wizard of Oz* of sports films.

Memo to Hollywood: Send Valainis a good golf script.

Maris Valainis (back row, second from left) excelled as Jimmy Chitwood in the movie *Hoosiers*. But what he'd really like now is a golf role, since the game is his first love.

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