



The Human Element Is What Makes Golf Great

By Rob Schultz

Sometime this week I'll be forced to answer the same two questions I've been asked each week for what seems to be the past zillion years.

The first question will come from my wife after she has observed me writing at home in my office for 12 straight hours: "Why don't you find a normal job with normal hours and a normal salary and start a normal life?"

The second question will come from a complete stranger who reads my newspaper. "You've got the greatest job in the world. Wow, would I love to cover a pro football team. Don't you think you're lucky?"

My answers are always the same. To my wife I'll answer: 'Cuz.' Then I'll turn around and stare back at my home computer screen and search my brain for a lead to some story on a defensive lineman from Hicksville, Miss.

To the good-natured soul on the street, I'll answer: "I am lucky because I love to write; I enjoy the camaraderie of some of the reporters I work with on the beat; I enjoy flexible hours and there's nothing better than finishing a big project and knowing you've done a good job."

Then I'll really shock the questioner with this last statement. "And finally, although I could do without covering football, I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't cover golf."

Both answers are always met with blank stares.

Nobody seems to understand, especially in football season, that covering a pro football team can be drudgery. It's simply something to do when I'm not covering golf. Covering golf is my passion. Everybody always seems to get that backward.

When I'm asked what it's like to write about pro football, I always think of Frank Deford's comments about the subject in his book *The World's Tallest Midget*: "The technology of sports, the bane of sportswriting, is pretty much on account of football, especially professional football. To my mind, without a doubt, the worst sportswriting in the United States is devoted to pro football. I suspect the seminal problem is that

there are simply too many people involved in a football game. It's like the House of Representatives. Nobody writes very well about that either."

"It's so difficult to personalize pro football, what with offensive teams, defensive teams, suicide squads, taxi squads, and even great numbers of coaches. As a consequence, writers are obliged to write about strategy and statistics, to the exclusion of the human element. Generally speaking, the smaller the number of people involved in a competition, the better it lends itself to writing."

Aah, golf. The human element pours out of the sport. Man vs. golf course. Watching a goal-line stand from the press box at Lambeau Field just doesn't match standing five feet away from a golfer who is trying to sink a three-foot putt on the 18th hole to win some tournament. It doesn't have to be the U.S. Open, either. The local city tournament provides the same kind of personal drama that always makes a good story.

If the golfer misses the putt he won't tell the writer he has to look at film the next day to determine why he blew it. He will bang the putter next to the bag, slump to the ground and tell you how much it hurts. And everyone can identify with that.

Last July at the state women's amateur match play tournament at Maple Bluff, Nicky Tiziani was destroyed by a whirlwind named Peggy Kelly during the championship match. Tiziani had just painstakingly climbed back into contention through the 10th hole then watched Kelly make four incredibly long putts on the succeeding holes to bury her. Tiziani didn't do anything wrong. Kelly just played better.

After the round, leaning up against a tree in the pouring rain, Tiziani sniffed back the tears.

"It just hurts to get drummed that bad," she said.

I knew readers would want to reach out and hug Tiziani after they read that. That's why I write. That's why I love covering golf. That's why I don't desire

a normal life with a normal job with normal hours.

Golfers don't even have to talk to writers to describe how they feel. I'll never forget Payne Stewart at last June's U.S. Open in Medinah. He had just missed the cut after missing a putt at the 18th hole during the second round. A youngster who idolized Stewart was waiting over an hour by the 18th green just to get his autograph. Stewart walked off the green in a huff. The youngster stuck out a piece of paper and a pen and asked, "Mr. Stewart, can I have your autograph?"

Stewart walked right by him and said, "Get a job kid."

Great stuff. A writer can't find that covering professional football. Someone might ask Jerry Rice why he dropped a pass that could have won the game for the San Francisco 49ers. More than likely you'd get a no comment. At best he would explain the zone the opposition was in, the kind of pass that Joe Montana threw, the pass rush on Montana, that kind of thing.

And the reader goes on to the next paragraph with an empty because there's no human element to identify with.

As I write this, it's nearing the end of the football season. I haven't held my one-month old baby girl in four days. Last night I got three hours of sleep. I just finished my 60th hour of work, and that doesn't count the six hours of travel time.

The coach of the football team that I cover for my newspaper is condescending toward reporters and several of the overpaid, pampered players are becoming increasingly hostile toward us.

I wouldn't mind the hassles so much if, just once, I got a football player to react to a situation just like Nicky Tiziani did at Maple Bluff last summer.

And I'd love it if, after asking a football player a question, he's just look at me and answer, "Get a job kid."

The golf season starts again in Wisconsin in four months. I can't wait.