



# Stricker, Kelly Are Old-school Success Stories

By Rob Schultz, Sports Writer, The Capital Times

It's appropriate that Steve Stricker and Jerry Kelly will celebrate their induction into the Wisconsin State Golf Association's Hall of Fame during separate dinners this month.

Wisconsin has been lucky to be the home of the two successful PGA Tour pros. What has made their stories so special is that their lives include so much more than hitting a golf ball.

On a personal level, Stricker and Kelly are tremendous family men who cherish their time with their wives and kids. They are involved in their community and provide great help to local charities like Very Special Arts and Vilas Park Zoo.

On a professional level, their most

extraordinary deeds are how they've struggled - most of the time right out in the open for all of us to watch and critique - to overcome their shortcomings in their games to become among the best golfers in the world.

It would be difficult to come up with better examples of great Wisconsin values. George Bailey has nothing on Stricker and Kelly, whose wonderful lives have touched many others in positive ways.

"People laugh at us about those values, but in the great scheme of things, that's what is important," said Madison's two-time U.S. Open champion Andy North, who knows Stricker and Kelly as well as anybody.

"Anybody would be proud to have those two as their kids," said North, who then added while chuckling, "Sometimes you want to smack one of them, but that's part of having kids."

On the surface, Stricker and Kelly seem to be polar opposites. Stricker, 40, whose Hall of Fame dinner was at Cherokee Country Club, is quiet and introspective, well-mannered and polite. If the PGA Tour had a Mr. Congeniality award, he'd win it every year.

Kelly, 41, whose Hall of Fame dinner was at Maple Bluff Country Club, is boisterous and wears his emotions on his sleeve. A former hockey player, Kelly walks a golf



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course looking like somebody who is craving a chest bump or a cross check. The galleries love him for it.

Truth be told, Stricker and Kelly are very similar golfers and that helps explain why they are good friends.

Their paths didn't really cross until they both reached the PGA Tour. Stricker, who grew up in Edgerton, dominated junior golf events and went on to become an All-American golfer at the University of Illinois. Kelly spent much of his youth playing hockey and didn't compete in many junior events.

After Kelly graduated from the University of Hartford in 1989, he focused only on golf and was hell-bent on making the PGA Tour. Few gave him much of a chance. After all, he had rarely won any tournaments he had played in. He didn't even win the Madison city men's tournament. That still irks him today.

But Kelly was the picture of persistence. Despite a sometimes balky swing, he worked on his game while he played mini-tour events few have even heard of and got a boost when he won the Wisconsin State Open in 1992.

After he hit a few million more balls, Kelly made it to the PGA Tour's new Hogan Tour, which is today's Nationwide Tour. By 1995 Kelly had won two events on that tour and was named its player of the year. Graduating to the PGA Tour, Kelly nearly won the 1996 Greater Milwaukee Open, losing to Loren Roberts in a playoff.

Kelly kept at it and nearly won the GMO again in 1999 before being overtaken by Carlos Franco. He made over a \$1 million for the first time in his career in 2001 and then finally won - at Hawaii and the Western Open in Chicago - in 2002. He's been among the top money-winners on Tour ever since.

Meantime, Stricker reached the PGA Tour in 1994 and quickly established himself as one of the young golfers to watch. Gifted with a beautiful swing, Stricker won during just his third full year on Tour - at the Kemper Open outside Washington D.C., and at the Western Open in Chicago in 1996. He finished fourth on the money list that year.

But instead of maintaining or bettering that performance, Stricker's game began to gradually slide until he lost all confidence in his swing and was starting down from the edge of the abyss.

Stricker lost his fully exempt card in 2004 and struggled through that year and 2005 before he became the picture of persistence, too. He spent the early months of 2006 hitting thousands of balls into the snow from a heated three-sided trailer at Cherokee. Always working alone, he didn't venture out from that trailer until he figured it out.

Stricker was the PGA Tour comeback player of the year in 2006 with seven top-10 finishes that helped him

end up 34th on the Tour's money list. It got even better this year after he won the Barclays and then gave Tiger Woods a run for the money before finishing runner-up in the inaugural FedEx Cup playoffs.

So Kelly and Stricker both used persistence to get through the worst of times. The only difference is those times occurred at different points of their careers.

"Welcome to sports," said North. "There are very few in sports who haven't had to go through that."

Young golfers, as well as many young people in general, can't get out of their own way these days without first seeking advice from mentors, parents, bosses or whoever they decide to call, text or email for help.

Stricker and Kelly are old-school men who have worked hard to know precisely who they are, what they are about and what they want. Thus, they don't need anybody's approval for anything. When time's up and a decision must be made - whether it's figuring out the line of a putt or joining a business venture - they make it and don't look back.

The two Wisconsin Tour pros bring to the table their own recipes for success that they each worked on alone until they were certain they worked. Those recipes, which include large portions of perseverance and confidence, will keep them winners no matter what they decide to do.

That's what Stricker and Kelly have in common. That's what separates them from so many others on the golf course and elsewhere. That's why they were inducted into the WSGA's Hall of Fame.

They are well-deserved honors. 



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