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One Step Away: Life in Minor-League Golf

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Introduction

One hot summer night when I was 11 years old, my dad took me and my friend Kyle to play golf at Bob-o-Link, a par-3 course located less than five minutes from our home in a Buffalo suburb. The course was unique in that it was lit for night play, so my dad was able to take us for an enjoyable excursion when he got home from work. Up to that point, I had been to the driving range a few times but had never set foot on the course, so the chance to finally play some real holes gave me an interesting combination of excitement and nervousness.

That is, until I made it to the first tee. After Kyle stepped up and knocked his opening shot onto the green, I approached the ball and missed. And again. And again. It took me 12 (according to my recollection) attempts to finally hit the ball, and once it did it was a weak 30-foot dribbler off the tee. The course was busy that night, so a crowd of over 20 customers waiting to tee off was watching, probably amused at my astounding lack of skill yet worried that the round would take forever with me in front.

Thankfully for my psyche as well as probably my dad and the other groups behind us, Kyle and I played a scramble format where we hit our second shots from the better of our two tee shots and repeating until we got the ball in the hole, playing as a team. This way, I was prevented from awkward situations where I probably would have taken more than ten shots on a number of holes. Kyle was a pretty

good player for his age, so I can reasonably say we used most of his shots, although I have a distinct memory of knocking a precise chip shot to inside three feet to help us save a par.

For a reason that I'm still not exactly sure why, the humiliating experience on the first tee didn't embarrass me to the point where I never returned to the course. I stuck with it, playing more and more over my middle school and early high school years, enjoying my improvement and steadily progressing to the point where I started to beat Kyle on a routine basis – with him usually displaying outward signs of discontent whenever we finished and I was victorious. I was never a great driver of the ball, but my mid-range iron play was steady, I was one of the best I knew at chipping from around the green, and my putting game saw plenty of good days. I was cut from my high school team in my sophomore and junior years but made it my senior year, not playing much but having a memorable day in the county championship, making par on all but one hole and finishing in a tie for second place. The memory of seeing my coach's face after posting my score is one I'll never forget, and the effort helped propel our team to the county championship.

Still, I was nowhere near good enough to even think about playing at a high level after high school, so my college choice was made without golf in mind. I came to Syracuse with the intent of playing casually whenever I had the chance, while knowing that my days of playing ten rounds a week were long behind me. The assumption proved correct, and I have settled into my role as a less-than-

obsessive golfer, enjoying my rounds when I can and not worrying when I can't play.

One of my golf-related dreams never went away, though, and that was my desire to cover golf as a career. I have always enjoyed reading golf magazines and golf books (John Feinstein is my favorite golf writer, and possibly my favorite sports journalist of all time), and I have entertained dreams of covering majors and writing books on interesting PGA Tour athletes. But without a school varsity team to cover, my only avenue for practicing golf journalism was by writing opinion pieces for a blog, which provided little possibility for interaction with actual players.

So when I started to think about what to tackle for my Capstone project, covering professional golf came to mind. I envisioned a summer where I would travel to tournaments across the country, interviewing players, collecting their stories and getting a sense of life on Tour. I knew that attending a few tournaments couldn't possibly give me a completely full picture – it would take full years to do that, considering the number of players (around 150) that competes in a given event, but I figured I would try.

With that idea in mind, I contacted Tim Murphy – who I had connected with while applying unsuccessfully for an internship at Golf World magazine in the spring of my junior year – and asked about the possibility of being granted media access to Web.com Tour (the Triple-A level of the PGA Tour) events for a

summer. Tim told me that he would make a couple of phone calls to see what he could do.

A few days later, Tim emailed me back with great news. He had contacted Jeff Adams, director of communications for the Tour, who said that he would love to help me out and that he would grant me credentials for any tournament I wished to attend. Just like that, I was off and running – I found an internship with the Buffalo Bisons Triple-A baseball team that granted me flexibility to travel, and I crafted a schedule that would see me travel halfway across the country to cover minor-league golf tournaments. I was loving it, and best of all, my parents loved it as well, generously offering to assist in my gas, food and hotel expenses.

My journey started immediately upon completion of my junior year, when I left Syracuse and headed for South Carolina for my first event. Many thousands of miles were covered, much unhealthy food was consumed, and many generic pop songs were heard on the radio over and over again. Sometimes I traveled alone, sometimes I traveled with others, and sometimes I even slept in the car – once for two consecutive nights. What did I learn? I'm not sure exactly, but the message is somewhere in the writing.

For my primary method of coverage, I created a blog – titled One Step Away, with the URL goveandthegang.blogspot.com – with the intent of keeping a thorough record for a book that I hope to someday write on life in the minor leagues. For this piece, I have arranged a selection of 'highlight' blog entries that I feel provides an accurate record of my summer in a condensed manner. Below, I

present the best of One Step Away, a journey through the world of minor-league golf.

-Kevin Prise, April 2013

Chapter I: Greenville

May 15, 2012

Let the golf begin

When I was a little kid, I would watch professional golf for hours on end.

I would watch Tiger, Phil, and all the rest, but I would also watch the lesser-knowns, the journeymen. I always wondered what life was like for these guys, without all the celebrity. I always wanted to learn about their lives as pro golfers, without the glamour and fame.

Now, somehow, I'm going to find out. I still can't believe it, really.

Thanks to the generosity of Golf World managing editor Tim Murphy, and the Nationwide Tour (especially Jeff Adams), I will be traveling to Nationwide Tour events this summer with media access and credentials. As a journalism major, I have been lucky to cover a variety of different events, but this endeavor is far and away the most special to me. It's the fulfillment of a life dream.

Anyway, what exactly am I doing? The best part is, I still don't know, really. I am working on a capstone project for my Honors distinction, and I am going to use the Nationwide Tour as my basis. Along the way, I hope to develop a sense of what life is like on the Tour, and everything that may entail.

Ultimately, it would be cool if I could write some sort of book from the material that I learn and gather, but at this point I don't even know what the book would be like. Heck, I wouldn't even know where to begin, but that's all part of the learning process.

I am also excited to meet golf journalists, and to talk to them about the lifestyle of covering golf tournaments. I hope to someday be a professional golf writer myself, and anything I can learn can only help me. Through this experience, I hope to learn what covering a golf tournament is really like, aside from my previous visualizations and perceptions.

I'm headed to Greenville tomorrow, to cover my first event, the BMW Charity Pro-Am. I left Syracuse last Wednesday, and I enjoyed a few days of golf and the beach with my brother Nick and friend Jack from school. We even got to play the Ralston Creek course at Daniel Island, where the Nationwide Tour Championship was held last fall. My uncle belongs there. Small world.

Like I said before, I don't really know where I'm going with this whole charade, but I can't wait to get there. I have a semblance of a plan, but the plan will only unfold as it will (did that even make sense?).

I will be posting stories, hopefully a lot of them. In addition to event coverage and interesting stories I may find along the way, I will be posting about my experiences as well. Everything is fair game, from my experiences covering the tournaments, to characters I may meet, to my life as a rogue traveling journalist.

I'm already pinching myself that this is really happening. Let the golf begin.

May 16, 2012

Welcome to Greenville

Made the nice country drive up from Charleston to Greenville in about 3 hours or so. Almost ran out of gas; I was on empty for almost 30 miles because there were no gas stations. The joys of rural South Carolina.

I checked in at the hotel before heading to the course, and it was a beaut: 10-minute walk from the course, or a 2-minute drive. Good freaking stuff. I drove today but will walk tomorrow. Hotel room was only 44 bucks a night and includes microwave and fridge. Better value than the \$130 hotel that brother Nick made me purchase on the way to South Carolina (even though that hotel did have a fridge, Nick made me throw away the sandwich that we kept in it, so a net usage of zero).

Tried to get to the course and had a true journey. Circled around the course a few times, with no idea where the clubhouse could be. Media parking signs were nowhere to be found. Ended up parking by the website programming trailer,

where the guy gave me a sharp look for disturbing his work. I was intimidated already.

Things went up from there, though. I meandered my way to the clubhouse, and I somehow found the media center after three or four wrong turns and inaccurate directions (everyone was really nice though, I should say). Everyone with the Nationwide Tour media team (Joe, Jeff, and Royce) was super nice, and the media coordinator for the event (Brett) had no trouble starting and continuing a conversation.

Before I knew it, I had my media pass, and Jeff was taking me down to the range. He introduced me to a bunch of Tour-related people such as the tournament director and a rules official. I even got to meet Stephanie Sparks, a Golf Channel reporter. What a surreal experience, standing on that range next to all these golfers I have followed for years. For me, I can't top that.

I also met Jeff Gove, one of the players I plan to follow throughout the summer. He couldn't have been nicer, and he seemed genuinely excited about meeting with me.

I found myself asking Jeff Adams all kinds of random questions about the Tour. After following the tour for so many years, I kept thinking of all kinds of random questions about random things, and it was crazy to be able to ask a legitimate source. He didn't have all the answers, but he told me I will be meeting people along the way who will know.

So tomorrow I will be getting up nice and early to follow Jeff Gove, who tees off at 9:35 a.m. After the round, we are going to sit down and talk for a while. I'm kind of nervous but really excited. I've been tracking this guy's golf for years, and now I get to have a discussion with him about his golf and career.

As for tonight, I'll be venturing out into downtown Greenville to see wherever the winds take me. By myself for four nights, I need to figure out some entertainment. I will probably never see most of these Greenvillites again, so I might as well try to have some fun. I might also dabble in a par-3 course that has lights, for some Bob-o-Link nostalgia.

Good stuff, good day, hopefully a good night ahead, and a good day tomorrow.

If all else fails, I know I'll have the media breakfast and lunch buffet. At this point, you can't really beat that.

May 17, 2012

Gove can't generate momentum, shoots even-par 71

Faced with a 30-yard uphill eagle chip on the par-5 15th, Jeff Gove had a good chance for birdie to get back to even-par on the day.

Gove left the chip about 20 feet short, and he had to settle for par.

It was that type of day for Gove. With little wind and soft scoring conditions, Gove couldn't maintain enough consistency to string together birdies or avoid

bogies. As a result, he had to settle for an even-par 71 that left him eight shots back of leader Darron Stiles.

"Just make a birdie, a bogey, no momentum," Gove said. "Miss an up and down, miss one tee shot, instead of keeping it going."

It is important to note that this tournament, the BMW Charity Pro-Am, is unique in that it uses a three-course rotation. All golfers play all three courses over the first 3 days of tournament play, and the field of 168 players is cut to 60 and ties before Sunday's final round. All who make the cut play Sunday at Thornblade Club, the host course for the event. Without official statistics to report, it looks like Greenville Country Club's Chanticleer Course is playing the hardest, with the Carolina Club playing the easiest.

Gove played Thornblade, the "middle-difficulty" course. He opened with a solid up-and-down for par at the first, and a nice 10-footer for birdie on the par-5 second. At that point, it looked like a low round could be in the cards.

The third hole would set the tone for Gove's round, however. After a decent drive that ended up in the left rough, he hit his second shot just over the green, leaving a 40-foot birdie putt from the fringe. He could not get up and down, however, and the sloppy bogey sent him back to even par.

Other miscues were incurred by Gove on the 6th, 10th and 14th holes. On the 6th, it was again due to putting, as he missed a short par putt after running a 30-footer for birdie 4 feet past the hole.

Gove just never really had the feel for the greens today, he said.

"I hit it through the break on (hole 6)," Gove said. "I hit the first putt hard, and then the second putt too hard. Then the rest of the day I was short. I got tentative."

On the 10th and 14th, it was errant driving that doomed Gove. The 10th is a 388-yard par-4 with an open fairway but a tree line down the right side. Gove drove his ball right into the trees, and he had no direct look at the green. All he could do was hit a low punch shot that bounced left of the green, and he failed to get the ball up and down.

The 14th has tree lines down both the left and right sides, and this time Gove drove his drive into the left trees. Just like on hole 10, he was forced to hit a low punch shot to avoid clipping a tree, and this one ended up short right of the green. His chip shot rolled 12 feet by the hole, and he couldn't convert the par save.

Thornblade has many birdie opportunities though, and Gove took advantage of a few to keep his final score from going over par. A big part of this was his ability to birdie the par-5 holes, as he went 3-under on Thornblade's four par-5s. He two-putted from 30 feet for birdie on the par-5 5th, and he got up and down from just short of the green for birdie on the par-5 16th. He could have gone 4-for-4 if not for the chipping miscue on 15.

The only non-par 5 that Gove was able to birdie was the par-4 12th, and it was a good one. He spun his short approach shot back to 12 feet, and he was able to slide in the left-to-right breaker for his birdie.

On the tough uphill par-4 18th, Gove finished up strong to preserve the even-par round. He muscled up an approach to about 20 feet short of the hole, and he two-putted for his par.

Still, the 18th green left Gove something to be desired.

"On 18, I was trying to make that putt," Gove said. "I left it right in the heart."

Tomorrow Gove heads to the toughest course on the rotation, the Chanticleer Course at Greenville Country Club. He tees off with Brian Vranesh at 8:45 a.m. If Gove can make it through Chanticleer with anything under par, he should have a shot to make the cut by going low Saturday. The cut is currently 2-under par, and it seems that the final cut will be around 4- or 5-under by Saturday.

Tomorrow's player focus will be Bob Heintz, who posted a 3-under 69 today at the Carolina Club. This is Heintz's first event of the season, as he hadn't made it into a field up to this point. Heintz said that his starts will be few and far between this season, so he needs to play well when he gets in. A top-25 finish gives a player entry into the next week's field on the Nationwide Tour, and Heintz is currently in a tie for 31st, one shot back of the top 25.

Heintz tees off tomorrow on the 10th tee at Thornblade at 9:55 a.m., with Steve Allan as his playing partner.

Par is 71 at Thornblade, and 72 at both Carolina Club and Chanticleer.

May 18, 2012

Determination helps Heintz shoot 68 despite early triple

Walking off the 12th green on Friday, Bob Heintz looked ashen. He had just chunked a short approach shot, chunked the ensuing two chips, and missed a 3-foot putt to take a triple-bogey 7 on the hole. Heintz had free-fallen outside the top 100 on the leaderboard, after starting the day tied for 31st.

Heck, he even questioned why he decided to play the event in the first place.

"Complete disaster," Heintz said. "I actually felt like I had completely blown myself out of the tournament. I was like, 'What am I doing here? Why did I leave home this week?'"

All he did from there on out was play the next 15 holes in 7-under par to salvage a 68. Heintz enters the weekend at the BMW Charity Pro-Am in a tie for 17th place at 6-under total, although Saturday he will play Greenville Country Club's Chanticleer Course, the most difficult in the 3-course rotation.

Still, considering his position after the 12th hole Friday, he could be doing a lot worse.

Heintz was the epitome of not giving up Friday, persevering through early disaster to shoot 3-under par and stay relevant in the tournament. After starting the day on hole 10 and going 4-over through his first 3 holes, he had a decision to make.

Throw in the towel, or keep plugging away?

"What are you going to do from there?" Heintz said. "You either quit, or you just keep working. I had three downwind holes in a row, and I took advantage."

And take advantage he did. He quickly proceeded to birdie the next four holes to get back to even-par on the round.

No harm, no foul.

The birdie on 13 came by way of an approach that danced all over the flagstick. Once Heintz made his swing, he was staring the ball down all the way.

"What's cool about that was it was a wedge and it was right at it," Heintz said. "I thought it could've gone in if it got lucky and hit the right bounce."

After the birdie run, Heintz cooled down and rolled off a string of pars. Some were routine, and some required a bit of touch around the greens. Heintz left his approach shots short on holes 17, 18 and 1, but was able to get up and down for par each time.

On hole 18, a long and uphill par 4, Heintz had a dangerous second shot. His drive ended up in the left rough, where he was faced with an approach that he wanted to shape from right to left. The problem? His lie suited a left-to-right shot, creating the possibility for the ball to end up anywhere.

Heintz made do, however. He adjusted appropriately, and his approach ended up in the fairway just short of the green, from where he salvaged his par.

The par streak continued until the par-5 5th. Short left of the green, Heintz was faced with a tricky chip over a bunker.

No worries. Heintz executed a deft chip shot to inside 5 feet, and he rolled in the birdie putt.

The momentum continued on the very next hole, the par-3 6th, after a superb shot to inside 6 feet. Past experience came in handy on club selection for Heintz, helping him hit it close.

"That's an interesting hole," Heintz said. "It always plays short. With the greens releasing, I felt if I hit a 7-iron all the way to the hole it would probably go off. So I reared back and pumped an 8-iron pretty hard, and it worked out."

Heintz nailed the putt to move to 2-under on the round.

If holes 5 and 6 served as a spark, the 8th hole provided the legitimate fireworks. After a nice tee shot, Heintz found a bit of trouble when a pulled approach left him with a tricky 30-yard chip shot.

Lining up the shot, Heintz's main concern was keeping from making a big mess, akin to the trouble back on hole 12. He had worked too hard to fight his way back from the abyss.

Naturally, he holed the shot.

"I had made such a great comeback, and I know this is bad golf psychology, but I didn't want to screw it up," Heintz said. "I was telling myself, 'Look, do the best you can from here. Give yourself a chance for par. It's okay if you make a bogey'".

"I forgave myself ahead of time, and the shot came out so perfect."

This is Heintz's first Nationwide Tour start of the year. Playing on a conditional exemption, the surest way of gaining eligibility for the next event is to place in the top 25. Currently tied for 17th, Heintz is right on that bubble.

Still, Heintz isn't sure how much professional golf he has left in him. He has floated between the PGA and Nationwide Tours for over a decade, and he hates to leave his family's well-being up to his golf game, especially when his tournament results have been rather inconsistent lately.

So Heintz, 41, has been searching for job possibilities. He graduated from Yale with a degree in economics, and he has been exploring his options.

He thinks that maybe his time to call it a career has come.

"We're in a situation where I think I need something more stable," said Heintz, who has four school-age children. "I just haven't had the results for a couple years, and I'm just looking elsewhere. I've got to support my kids."

Still, if Heintz can keep up his torrid play from the last 15 holes Friday, he should be in a position to finish in the top 25. In that case, he would gain entry into the next Nationwide stop, in two weeks at The Rex Hospital Open.

In that case, would he play?

"Sure, what the heck," Heintz said.

And if he wins?

All right, we won't get too far ahead of ourselves here.

In any event, Heintz's Friday effort provided an example of determination and refusal to quit under adversity. Traits that fathers strive to instill in their kids.

"That round is something, if my kids did it, I would be pretty proud," Heintz said.

"I'm happy I was able to do it."

Heintz closed the week with a pair of 74s, finishing at 1-under par, eight strokes back of the top 25. After playing a few more events throughout the summer, he stayed true to his word and decided to retire from professional golf, accepting the position of head golf coach at the University of Pennsylvania.

May 20, 2012

With fiancée by his side, Streb notches career-best finish

After signing his scorecard and signing autographs for youngsters, Robert Streb was approached by his fiancée Maddie for a hug.

The two embraced, and the crowd roared.

With Maddie and her family cheering him on every step of the way, Streb shot a Sunday 68 at Thornblade to finish T3 in the BMW Charity Pro-Am. Streb may have fallen one shot short of a playoff, in a bid for his first career Nationwide Tour victory, but the Kansas State graduate will happily take the performance.

"I can't complain," Streb said. "I've been playing well. A win would've been nice, but I had a chance, so that's good."

Playing on conditional status so far this year, Streb has shot up the money list with a string of solid finishes. This is his first full season on the Nationwide Tour after finishing T100 at PGA Tour Q-School to gain conditional status, and his finish this week should assure him of eligibility the rest of the season.

Considering that he played the Hooters Tour mini-tour last year, the opportunity provided by a full season on the Nationwide Tour is not lost on Streb.

"It's fantastic," Streb said. "I didn't know where I was going to be playing, or if I was going to be playing. I'm pretty excited with how it's gone."

After hitting his tee shot on the par-3 17th to the center of the green, Streb gave Maddie a high-five. The family was cheering on the sideline and enjoying every minute of it.

Streb's finish did not disappoint. He almost holed the birdie bid, tapped in for par, and parred 18 after a well-struck approach to the center of the green.

Although he came up a shot short, Streb enjoyed the experience of being in contention on Sunday.

"It's nice," Streb said. "Something a little different. You've got to deal with your nerves a little bit, but it was a good test today."

And no matter how Streb performs the rest of the year, in his quest to finish in the top 25 and gain a PGA Tour card, he can take comfort knowing that Maddie is by his side.

Streb indeed finished the 2012 season inside the top 25, and he is currently playing his rookie season on the PGA Tour. Through April 24, he has made 6 of 12 cuts and earned \$320,708.

May 20, 2012

Flanagan returns from abyss to notch first win in 5 years

Four years ago, Nick Flanagan wasn't sure if he would ever be back in the victory circle again.

Heck, earlier this week his main concern was getting a top-25 finish so he could play in the next event.

But after a whirlwind four days, Flanagan got up-and-down from a greenside bunker on the third playoff hole to win the BMW Charity Pro-Am over Cameron Percy. Flanagan and Percy both completed 72 holes at 15-under par.

"I'm very glad that bunker shot went to a foot," Flanagan said. "So that I wouldn't have to think too much about the next one."

Percy struggled at the 18th in regulation to open the door for Flanagan. Playing in the group ahead, Percy pushed his approach on the long par-4 into the greenside bunker and missed a 10-foot downhill par attempt. Ten minutes later, Flanagan sunk a 10-foot putt of his own - this one for birdie - to force the playoff.

Flanagan will admit that he got lucky on his approach, as his shot from 206 yards out flew the green but bounced off the grandstand and back within 10 feet.

"I got super, super lucky," Flanagan said. "It took a long time to come back onto the green. I didn't realize it was 10 feet, but I'll take it."

The win does a lot for Flanagan's career. Playing on conditional status, this was only his second event of the year. Now he has full Nationwide Tour status for this year and next, and he no longer has to worry about eligibility on a week-to-week basis.

Not only is he surprised to be holding a trophy, but he also is rather surprised that he is still playing competitively at all.

"It's been so long since I've been playing golf tournaments," Flanagan said.

"Three or four years ago when I started struggling, I didn't know if I'd be playing tournament golf at all. I'm pretty happy to win."

That's because in 2007, after winning three Nationwide events to earn a mid-season promotion to the PGA Tour, Flanagan's game began to fade. After striving for years toward gaining eligibility on the PGA Tour, he couldn't get comfortable when he finally got to the big stage.

He found that the Tour was more professional than social. Golf was the sole focus, and Flanagan found it difficult to push forward whenever his game stalled.

"I hadn't grown into it yet," Flanagan said. "Week to week, I felt like I was battling the whole time. It's hard to get motivated when you're playing terrible, and I didn't feel like I was part of the Tour."

The culture change led Flanagan into a downward spiral with his golf game, where he went five years without a win. That is, until things came together this week in Greenville. After years of struggle, it looks like Flanagan is finally finding his way back.

It's a good thing, too, because he doesn't really know what he would do otherwise.

"I don't really know how to do anything else," Flanagan said.

For at least the next year and a half, he won't need to.

Chapter II: Wichita

June 19, 2012

Carry on, my wayward son

Kansas.

That's where I'm headed for my next journey, and I'm not sure if I'm ready.

Wichita is my next destination on the Nationwide Tour, and the drive will log me almost 1,200 miles. I don't have to cover any more Bisons games until mid-July, so I figured this would be a good time to take a little trip out on the Nationwide Tour.

So here I am, headed to the Preferred Health Systems Wichita Open, with my little brother Alex and his friend in tow. When they asked if they could come, I said sure, not thinking they would actually come.

Of course, they wanted to come. But in reality it should be all right, and at least I won't have to make the 18-hour trek by myself. That could be dangerous, and it will be fun to have some company throughout the excursion.

To make my trip seem more manageable, I've broke it up into seven segments. On the way to Kansas from home in Buffalo, we will pass through Erie, Cleveland, Columbus, Indianapolis, St. Louis, and Kansas City on the way to Wichita. I will view each of these cities as a milestone on the expedition.

We have a nice La Quinta hotel booked for Wednesday through Saturday nights, and tonight we'll find a rest area somewhere along the silk highway. The goal is to leave Orchard Park by 3 p.m. today, and to be in Kansas sometime tomorrow afternoon. I'll need to stop by the media center tomorrow to pick up my credentials, so I can't arrive too late.

The hotel even has complimentary breakfast, which should complement the media buffet nicely.

One of the reasons I wanted to cover this event was that I saw Jeff Brehaut's name in the field. Brehaut is one of my favorite golfers, a journeyman grinder who played a few seasons in the big leagues, but whose game has fallen out of sorts over the past few years.

Brehaut's game has fallen to the point where he no longer has full Nationwide Tour status. This will be only his second start of the year, and he missed the cut at the Mexico Open earlier this month. He also tried to qualify for the U.S. Open, but failed to advance through sectional qualifying. Essentially, Brehaut is lacking a place to play consistently, and he hasn't played well enough when he's had the chance.

Not a good combination, but a top-25 finish on the Nationwide Tour gains entry into the next event, and Brehaut's effort to maintain eligibility will be a featured story here this week.

I was also happy to see Omar Uresti's name in the field. Coming off a made PGA Tour cut two weeks ago at the FedEx St. Jude, Uresti is looking to make a summer surge into the top 25 on the Nationwide money list. Uresti has two top-12 finishes this year to date, and he will need a few more if he looks to charge into top-25 money list contention. Top 25 at the end of the year would give Uresti higher status next year on the PGA Tour, although he does already have Veteran Member status, good for a handful of tournaments every year.

Jeff Gove, the namesake of this blog, will also be on the radar. Gove looks to take momentum from a much-needed top-25 finish in Mexico, which came on the heels of four consecutive missed cuts. Gove is currently mired at No. 114 on the money list, and he, too, will need a big summer if he hopes to crack the top 25.

Another interesting storyline is Casey Wittenberg, a Nationwide Tour player who cracked the top 10 at last week's U.S. Open, tying for 10th at Olympic.

Wittenberg should certainly find Crestview CC (Wichita's host course) a bit more accommodating than Olympic, where every player in the field finished over par. Last year's winning score at Crestview? 18-under.

Aaron Watkins is also in the field at Crestview. Watkins also had a solid showing at the U.S. Open, tying for 15th, a bit surprising considering he is only 65th on the Nationwide Tour money list, with six missed cuts in 10 starts. Just goes to show how fine the line truly is, between the best in the world and the Nationwide contingent.

My early pick for this week? Watkins. I've just got a feeling that Olympic was exactly what Watkins needed to rejuvenate his season moving into the summer months. At a course where birdies shouldn't be too hard to come by (last year's cut was 2-under), I say Watkins will make a bushel of them and come away with the trophy.

Most importantly, Watkins has a track record of success at Crestview. In four previous starts, the Kansas State grad has three top-13 finishes, including a 6th-place showing last year, and has never missed the cut. It just seems like a winning combination to me, and Watkins should have a solid contingent of college acquaintances rooting him on as well.

Sunday night I was still weighing the pros and cons of this trip, when I talked to my good friend Jack on the phone. Jack and I share a similar life mentality, which we call the "escapist" philosophy, in honor of a great Coldplay song. For a Buffalo kid who has not ventured much off the East Coast, it doesn't get much more "escapist" than a trip to Kansas.

And to cover golf while I'm at it? Even better. The adventure kicks off this afternoon, and I'm ready to roll.

The band Kansas plays in the Buffalo area tonight, and I probably would have gone to the concert if I weren't trekking to Kansas proper. I'll make sure to listen to some Kansas on the way out of town.

Brother Alex and friend? Hope you know what you're getting yourselves into.

June 20, 2012

In Wichita, somehow

Nobody ever said it was easy.

Last night around 5 p.m., behind schedule of course, I hit the road for Kansas, with my brother and his friend along for the ride and trip. I knew the drive would be long, but I had never before made a straight-shot drive longer than eight hours, and the effect certainly wore on me.

In the end, I made it, but I should probably thank my lucky stars. Around 2 a.m., somewhere between Indianapolis and St. Louis, I started to get really tired. We made a pit stop at Denny's around 1, but for some reason the chicken wraps and quesadilla made matters even worse.

Anyways, I started to semi-doze off as I meandered along the road. By semi-doze, I mean that I would close my eyes for a few seconds and then snap back to reality when my instincts kicked in. Thank God for my instincts, because I feel like I almost swerved into a truck at some point.

Thankfully, I found a rest area sometime around 2:30 and pulled over. I feel like I immediately passed out after taking the key out of the ignition. Good thing I stayed up long enough to take the key out, because I definitely didn't need to deal with calling AAA from an Indiana/Illinois rest area in the middle of the night. I just know it would have taken forever to get service.

Woke up around 4:45, after a solid two-plus hours of sleep, and got right back on the road. A few hours later, a Waffle House sign came calling, and we obviously had to oblige. Aside from the Waffle House detour and a quick gas tank fill-up, it was a straight shot to Wichita. I don't know how I kept from getting discouraged about the magnitude of the drive - although I admit it was awful when I saw a sign reading "Kansas City - 272 miles," knowing that Kansas City was still 3 hours from Wichita, and knowing that I had to fight my eyes if I wanted to stay awake. Good thing Waffle House gives free refills on coffee.

Normally I hate highway tolls, but I had to laugh when I saw that Interstate 35 charged a toll in Kansas. No tolls through Cleveland, Columbus, Indianapolis, St. Louis or Kansas City, at any point. But through the desolate flatlands of rural Kansas? Oh, \$3.75, of course. It was just too bizarre not to appreciate.

And I have to admit, the middle-of-nowhere service area was a nice touch. I didn't dabble at McDonald's, but the clutch bathroom allowed me to change into golf clothes. I figured that showing up at the course in a chocolate-covered lime green T-shirt would not have been the best idea.

When I finally rolled into Crestview Country Club, after 19 hours of driving over a 22-hour period, I was beat. But the people couldn't have been nicer, and they genuinely seemed happy to have me there. The reception was much appreciated, and I still feel like I'm living a dream, traveling the country and covering golf.

Tomorrow, the tournament begins. Now that I'm here, at my spacious hotel desk in Wichita, it feels great to say that I made it. Somehow.

June 21, 2012

Despite putting troubles, Brehaut posts Thursday 68

Jeff Brehaut knows his starts on the Nationwide Tour could be few and far between this year. He also knows he needs to play well when he gets in, if he wants to play as much as possible.

Striking the ball on Thursday, Brehaut looked like a PGA Tour player in midseason form. But putting-wise? Not so much.

From the first tee Thursday, Brehaut had his driver and iron game in complete command. He hit his first 11 greens in regulation, and he had good looks at birdie on most of them.

"I hit it good today," Brehaut said. "Especially since I haven't been playing any, so I wasn't really sure what I was gonna get."

But the putts refused to drop, and Brehaut settled for an opening round of 3-under 68. Not bad, but still close enough to the cut line (currently 2-under) where making the cut will require a solid round on Friday.

"I wasn't hitting awful putts," Brehaut said. "But they weren't going in. Maybe I wasn't hitting it quite close enough, but I had a lot of 10- to 15-footers. Yeah, I feel like I left a few out there."

After missing the cut in his first start of the season at the Mexico Open, Brehaut was given one of four sponsors' exemptions by the Wichita Open staff. Brehaut played the event every year from 1993 to 1998, and he made a good impression at the tournament, to the point where they wanted him back.

Knowing that a top-25 finish gets him into next week's event in Indiana, Brehaut has a lot on the line this week. Sponsors' exemptions are hard to come by (standard events can only allocate four), and there is no guarantee Brehaut will gain entry into any more events based on his Tour status. He may, but it depends on how many players ahead of him decide to play in a given week.

The best way to improve your status is to make more money. The only way to make Tour money is to make cuts in tournaments. Hence, the importance of getting into tournaments, making cuts and finishing inside the top 25.

But if Brehaut was feeling any jitters, it didn't show early. The San Francisco-area resident hit a perfectly positioned drive on the dogleg-right opening hole, and he had birdie putts inside 20 feet on his first four holes.

But he didn't make any, and he went to the 7th tee still even-par on the day, despite no missed greens. The 7th is a tough par-4 built around a lake, and a bogey there could have hurt Brehaut mentally.

"Say you get four good looks at birdie (early), and then you make a bogey," Brehaut said. "That's when it gets frustrating, because then you're thinking 'geez, man, I should be 2-under, and I'm 1-over.'"

No worries, though. Brehaut had been hitting it great to that point, and he hit two perfect shots to leave himself with an 8-footer for birdie. He knocked it in, and he would remain under par for the rest of the day.

But it wasn't easy. Playing the 13th at 1-under, Brehaut was faced with his first chip shot of the afternoon after pulling his approach a few yards left. The pin was tucked on the left of the green, so the margin for error on the approach was slim.

"I had a pretty good number for a 9-iron, and I hit a good shot," Brehaut said. "I just pulled it a little bit. But there's only three steps to the left of that pin, so I knew when it missed the green, it was going to be a hard chip."

And the chip was certainly a testy one, requiring a precise shot down a slippery slope. But Brehaut judged it perfectly, and the ball landed just in the fringe before rolling inside 3 feet. The par kept Brehaut at 1-under, and the momentum was sustained.

"The rough here is pretty sticky and tough," Brehaut said. "I had a tough shot, but I hit a great shot. To get a tap-in par in that situation was nice."

Holes 14 and 18 are short par-5s, easily reachable for anyone in the field with a good drive, and Brehaut was up to the task. The two-time Nationwide Tour

winner had eagle putts inside 20 feet on both holes, and the easy tap-in birdies allowed him to post a round of 3-under.

The 68 may have been a 62 if a few more 10- to 15-footers had fallen, but as Brehaut said post-round, 'that's golf.' He returns to action tomorrow morning, looking to convert a few more birdie chances and play the weekend.

Either way, he's not one to complain about a 68.

"Overall, if you told me I was 3-under, I would've taken it," Brehaut said.

Brehaut finished T52 in Wichita, and he didn't make it into another tournament the rest of the year. However, he finished in second place at Champions Tour Q-School and will have status on the 50-and-over circuit once he turns 50 on June 13.

June 22, 2012

Damron back in swing of things, and contending

Robert Damron is fully committed to golf this summer, for the first time in a while. Damron hasn't played a full schedule in recent years, for a range of reasons from apathy to injury.

But the former PGA Tour winner feels rejuvenated in 2012, and Wichita is his 14th start between the PGA and Nationwide Tours.

"I've probably played as many tournaments to this point as I have full seasons the last three or four years," Damron said. "I felt like I've been playing good, I've been doing certain things well in spurts, so if I stack them together things will be well."

And based on his results so far this week, he is right. Damron posted rounds of 67-65 to open the Preferred Health Systems Wichita Open, and is right in the hunt at 10-under, two strokes back of leader Jim Herman. The veteran started quickly with birdies on four of the first five holes, all from 10 feet or closer, and made four more birdies to offset a pair of bogeys.

Feeling positive about most aspects of his game, Damron went out and executed.

"I hit it in pretty decent spots off the tee, and then had my short irons going there for a while where I just hit them close," Damron said. "I felt good with the putter all day. I thought any time I got it around the hole, I was going to have a pretty good chance, and I made most of them."

Closing with an easy two-putt birdie on the short par-5 18th, Damron earned a spot in the final pairing on Saturday. Although he has already made 9 cuts between the two tours, Damron is still looking for his first top-10 finish, and he has had only one top-25. Now he gets to put his refreshed attitude to the test, with a forecast of high heat and high winds for Saturday.

And Damron said he will welcome the windy conditions, knowing that ball-striking will be at a premium.

"That's good," Damron said. "It just keeps guys from shooting really low. That means I do need to go to the range and strike it a little more solidly."

Even after two rounds of golf in the mid-60s, always room for improvement for a seasoned pro like Damron.

Although it seems like alternating between the two tours could cause a player to struggle with rhythm, Damron said he has gotten used to the adjustments by now. The Kentucky native has made 328 starts on the PGA Tour and 64 on the Nationwide circuit over the course of his career, and he knows what to expect.

"It doesn't matter what tour you play, as long as you're playing," Damron said. "Every course has a fairway and a green and a hole, and you're going to get rhythm, and you can carry that rhythm from that (PGA) tour to this tour, or vice versa. I've been around so long, it's not a big difference to me."

And his experience may come into play on Saturday, especially if the winds pick up like expected. Damron has learned not to get too worked up about bad shots, which could come in handy when a gust shoots down a well-struck ball.

"I don't get too frustrated," Damron said. "If I got frustrated every time I hit it bad, I'd be in the mental ward right now. You just try to do the best you can with what you've got."

Don't be surprised if Damron remains in contention throughout the weekend.

June 23, 2012

Allred enthusiastic during round of 68, Brehaut struggles

After Jason Allred snap-hooked his tee shot into a lake on hole 7, he took a double bogey to fall back to even on the day, and 5-under on the tournament. On the same hole, Allred's playing partner Jeff Brehaut rolled in a 10-footer for par after leaving his approach in a green side bunker, remaining at 2-under on the day, 7-under on the week.

Brehaut looked confident with his putter, having made four consecutive par-saving putts from outside three feet. In the windy conditions, not to mention the tricky pin placements tucked on edges of greens, Brehaut's game looked well-suited to make a move up the leaderboard, with Crestview's easier back nine looming.

But from that point forward, Brehaut's putting game deserted him. The 49-year-old missed four putts from inside four feet over the rest of his round, three for birdie and one for par, to post a 71 that could have easily been a 67.

"I choked like a dog out there," Brehaut said.

On the reverse end of the spectrum, Allred kept rolling in 6-footer after 6-footer, getting momentum back after the double and sustaining it for the rest of the day. Brehaut may have struck the ball more consistently, but Allred had the touch on the greens.

As a result, Allred is in the clubhouse with a three-round total of 8-under, optimistic that the afternoon winds will allow him to have an outside shot at the title tomorrow.

After grinding out a string of pars in the consistent winds that approached 30 mph at times, Allred made his move up the leaderboard with birdies at four of his last five holes, with a bogey on 17 sprinkled in.

Allred's shot of the day without question was a wedge to 10 feet on hole 15, from under a tree and over a lake. The Scottsdale, Arizona resident took his time making sure he could execute the shot, and pulled it off cleanly. The ball landed on the top of a slope about 30 feet past the hole, and started to roll toward the pin once it landed.

"On one hand, I got pretty lucky to even have a chance," Allred said. "But it was a pretty dicey shot, and one of our goals is to just play the percentages. That said, one of my other goals today was to just play like a kid, and I didn't feel like it was too crazy to try."

Allred's youthful attitude was on full display after pulling off the shot on 15, pumping his fist and high-fiving his caddy. Throughout the round, Allred made sure to enjoy his good shots, and he refrained from getting too negative after the bad ones, his drive into the water on hole 7 included.

Feeling that he tends to put too much pressure on himself on the golf course, Allred embraces his refined persona, brought about by seeing his kids' laid-back mentality.

"My tendency is to try too hard to do too well," Allred said. "I have two little kids now, and just watching the way they play, they're so free. I play my best golf when I'm that way."

Having one of his best friends as caddy this year helps, too.

"He catches me getting a little too uptight or serious," Allred said. "He's like 'hey, man, just let it rip and do your best.' And ultimately, that's all I can do."

And although Allred had missed three cuts in a row before Wichita, his overall results this year have been positive. The Oregon native already has three top-25 finishes in 11 previous Nationwide Tour starts this season, playing his first full season on Tour since 2007.

Allred is currently 75th on the money list, and a good finish Sunday could put him in position to make a mid-season run toward the top 25. He has played one full PGA Tour season, in 2005, and would surely love to get back.

And if the wind continues for the rest of the day, Allred's 8-under number could look pretty good heading into Sunday.

"I think a lot of guys are going to have 4- to 6-foot par putts all day," Allred said.

"Even if you hit it on the green, there's some tricky pins, and you're going to have some comeback putts. Thankfully I putted really well and kept myself in it."

Regardless of what happens Sunday, Allred is making sure to enjoy the opportunity to play consistently on the Nationwide circuit again, for the first time in five years.

"I feel like I'm close," Allred said. "I've felt that way every week. It's fun to be out here just having a chance, and hopefully I'll have at least an outside shot tomorrow."

Allred closed the tournament with a Sunday 69 and finished T15, earning \$9,000.

He finished the season 81st on the money list with \$70,367 in earnings, and he received conditional Web.com Tour status for 2013.

June 23, 2012

Still loving the game after years of frustration, Waldorf shines

Duffy Waldorf is in an interesting spot this year. The 49-year-old Waldorf, a four-time PGA Tour winner with over \$11 million in career earnings, finds himself with limited status on the big tour.

Injuries have kept Waldorf from playing consistently for the last few years. When he has been able to play, he hasn't performed well enough to retain full PGA Tour status.

And with the Champions Tour looming (he turns 50 in August), Waldorf wants to compete as much as possible.

"I love to golf," Waldorf said. "I love to play competitive golf. I just feel like I need competition."

So here he is, out on the Nationwide Tour, fighting along with everyone else on the minor-league circuit. After all, what else would he do after nearly 30 years as a professional golfer?

"Playing out here is just as good as playing on the PGA Tour," Waldorf said. "It gives you good competition, and it feels just like playing a Tour event. So I can't think of a better way to get ready for the Champions Tour."

While he's here, he might as well play good golf. Waldorf posted a 68 in the windy conditions early Saturday afternoon, shooting up the leaderboard from a tie for 38th into a tie for 12th. The UCLA grad started off with birdies on his first two holes, and he finished strong with a two-putt birdie on the par-5 18th.

Considering the difficulties, Waldorf is pleased with his play.

"The last few days we had a bit of wind, but a gentle wind, more like 10 mph," Waldorf said. "Today was definitely 20, 20-plus, and it made a big difference. You could tell right out of the box that it was going to be a tough day."

The veteran knew it wasn't a day to get too wrapped up in shooting a low score, and he played accordingly.

"It was more just making pars, making pars, staying in play," Waldorf said. "And then when I got the opportunity, make some birdies."

Waldorf has split time between the two tours this year, playing on the PGA Tour when he can and the Nationwide when he can't. Interestingly enough, he has been more consistent on the big tour in making six of seven cuts, compared to three of six on the Nationwide circuit. However, the Northridge, California resident has played well on the Nationwide when he has made the cut, with a T2 and T11 to his credit.

The consistency on the big tour can be explained, Waldorf said.

"In general, my game is a little more suited for the regular tour," Waldorf said.

"Only in my mentality. I tend to play more conservatively on the regular tour, the scores are higher. When you come to the Nationwide Tour, the scoring's a little better. The courses yield more birdies, the greens tend to be a touch softer, maybe not as much rough. So you have to adjust your mindset to be a little more aggressive and shoot for more birdies."

And since Champions Tour course setups are similar to those on the Nationwide, Waldorf feels that this tour provides solid preparation for when he turns 50.

"The Champions Tour, from what I understand, is very similar to that," Waldorf said. "You want to be shooting for birdies, play aggressive."

With Waldorf providing a solid showing in Wichita, don't be surprised if he comes out firing on the Champions Tour come August.

Waldorf has played 10 Champions Tour events since turning 50 and has placed in the top 10 five times, including a second-place finish at the Greater Hickory Classic at Rock Barn this past October.

June 24, 2012

Sidelined for six months, Davidson happy to be back on Tour

Matt Davidson is happy to make the cut here in Wichita, but his early struggles Sunday would have frustrated anyone.

Davidson opened the final round with a bogey on 4 and doubles on 6 and 9, ruining any chances of earning a nice-sized paycheck this week. At 1-under for the event and flirting with last place, a solid back nine would be near-fruitless from a monetary standpoint.

But in his first tournament of 2012 after tearing his ACL late last year, the experienced Davidson knows that any tournament setting is a chance to improve. Especially after not playing for a few months.

"It's tough," Davidson said. "But then you're just trying to work on your game, trying to make some birdies to get back to a respectable score. You know that you're probably not going to have a good finish after that start, so it's just trying to build for next week."

So Davidson went out and made a score on the back nine, shooting a 4-under 32 capped off by a birdie on 18. Although the effort wouldn't even move him into the top 50 on the week, the North Carolina resident was happy to finish strong.

Davidson, who tore his ACL playing basketball, found himself feeling a bit uncomfortable during his first round Thursday. But he battled through the initial sense of confusion, and said he is excited for next week.

"I got into it," Davidson said. "After the first round, I sort of settled in. But the first round I was definitely a little more anxious than I normally am, in the middle of the season."

And battling the early nerves to make the cut in his return, after six months off? Not half-bad.

"I didn't have much expectation," Davidson said. "I just really wanted to finish four rounds and not have my knee hurting too bad. I guess I kind of did that. It (the knee) is a little sore, but not too bad."

June 24, 2012

Johnson grateful for loyal caddy, final thoughts

Kevin Johnson had missed eight consecutive cuts before finally breaking through this week in Wichita, and he knows that his caddy Smiley could have easily deserted him by now.

He wouldn't have blamed him. Caddies need money, and when your player misses a cut, you aren't getting much of a paycheck.

But Smiley has stuck with Johnson through the struggles and was rewarded this week.

"He's good," Johnson said. "He's been right there pushing me, and a lot of guys would've left by now. It's kind of like having a dog or something, he just won't leave you."

Enjoying the Sunday atmosphere for the first time in months, Johnson finished up a solid tournament by shooting a 70, to post 10-under on the week and tie for 15th. Heading into the heart of the season, Johnson is relieved that he was able to produce a good tournament.

"I hit it good all four days," Johnson said. "Which I haven't done in a couple months. Maybe a couple years."

"I'm definitely excited. We've got more than half the year left, and hopefully we get heated up for the summer."

And knowing that his man was set for a decent-sized paycheck, Smiley decided to have some fun coming down the stretch. On the raucous 17th, where caddies race each other down the fairway, he chased Jason Allred's caddy and tackled him in front of the green. Allred's caddy responded by quickly jumping up in pursuit and racing to make a tackle in response.

Although Smiley fell short, it was all in good fun.

"It was kind of embarrassing," Johnson said. "The way he lost his wind, he's just smoking too many cigarettes. I've got to get him on a regiment or something."

Chapter III: Evansville

June 27, 2012

And the beat rolls on

I'm alive.

Wasn't a walk in the park, but I'm here at the sight of our next tournament, and ready to go.

Sitting here in my newest hotel room, a Quality Inn on the outskirts of Evansville, Indiana, some reflections about the travels of the last few days:

- After wrapping up my work at the Wichita Open, I said farewell to everyone in the media room and hit the road. Stopped at a hot dog/ice cream stand called Freddy's on the outskirts of Wichita, and ordered way too many chili cheese fries. Took me about an hour to finish most of them, there were so many. Because, of course, I wasn't about to waste any moderately expensive food.

And in that hour, I couldn't even finish them all. So I took the leftovers for the road, knowing they wouldn't even be worth eating later, and moved on.

- Hit the road toward Kansas City, as we had decided to go to Worlds of Fun (an amusement park) on Monday. I was happy, too, because I had always read about Worlds of Fun in amusement park books growing up, and was happy to finally see it.

I had to convince brother Alex and friend not to go to Schlitterbahn (a water park in Kansas City) since we were planning on going to Holiday World on Tuesday. Yes, a plan, somehow.

Once we reached the Worlds of Fun area just past Kansas City, I realized that it was probably time to start looking for a hotel. But with my money-conscious attitude on these trips, the prospects of paying anything over 50 bucks a night scared the crap out of me. Wasn't going to happen.

Then we see a sign for "Worlds of Fun Village." Sold.

We drove in, right past the booth that asked for \$17 for parking, since there was nobody monitoring the booth at 1 a.m. Beautiful. Gotta beat the system whenever you can.

Found a parking spot next to a few cabins and RV sites, and turned off the car, with hopes of going right to sleep. Except that the sweltering heat made it

impossible to sleep without constantly sweating, so it took a few hours to fall asleep.

In the meantime, my brother and his friend slept on top of the car for a while, trying to feel better. Around 3 a.m. they knocked on the door, asking to get back in. When they knocked, I freaked out, thinking it was a burglar. Good thing it wasn't.

When it got to be around 8 a.m., we got out of the car and started to explore the campsite area. There were a few people up, walking their dogs and such, and we acknowledged the folks walking past.

Then we started to get our money's worth (especially considering our lodging was free.)

We found a shower, and we all took nice hot showers. I even used my soap and shampoo, too. If we hadn't been able to shower, it would have been a while until we had another chance.

Also found a washer and dryer, so we threw in a load.

And with our \$10 off coupons to the park, we definitely got good use out of our Worlds of Fun experience.

Around 10 a.m., knowing that the park was opening, we decided to head in. As we had just put our laundry in the dryer, we decided it would be safe if we left it

in while we were in the park. After all, if we made it through a night without danger, how risky could it be?

Oh yeah, I also ate those chili cheese fries while sitting on my tailgate and reading a book. Maybe it's just because I was reading, but the fries were great.

Spent about six hours in the park, and enjoyed it. Feels a lot like Darien Lake near Buffalo, with a similar layout and similar types of rides. A highlight was the Prowler, a wooden roller coaster with high speeds and a lot of quick turns. Rode it twice in a row, as the wait time was surprisingly low.

As we were riding an indoor dark ride (Cyclone Sam's), I started talking to a guy from Nebraska. I told him what I was doing, and that we were heading to Indiana for the next event. He told me that if I did one thing in Indiana, to make sure that I went to Holiday World, another amusement park that I had read about growing up.

Good omen.

June 27, 2012

The Nationwide Tour is no longer

Had a nice surprise when I checked out PGATour.com today. After almost 10 years of checking the Tour website and clicking on "Nationwide Tour" when I wanted to see what was happening on the Triple-A circuit, the word "Nationwide" was nowhere to be found.

That's because the PGA Tour today announced a change in its Triple-A title sponsorship. After 10 years as title sponsor of the minor league circuit, Nationwide Insurance is giving way to Web.com.

The change is effective immediately, so the Nationwide Tour is now called the Web.com Tour. Everything has already changed on the PGA Tour website, where I already saw an article in which PGA Tour player Jeff Overton refers to the Tour as the "Web.com Tour."

So what changes for me in my coverage? Nothing much. All I have to do is figure out how to change my blog title. "Life on the Nationwide Tour" will have to change to "Life on the Web.com Tour."

I'm already being tempted to type "Buy.com Tour," in reference to a former name of the Tour, before Nationwide took the reins almost 10 years ago. I wonder if others will have the same problem.

I also wonder if the Tour has been planning this for a while, and if signs that would normally say "Nationwide Tour" will instead say "Web.com Tour" this week in Evansville. I'm trying to think of other things that need to be changed, and I'm sure there are plenty. I guess I'll see soon enough.

Either way, now I guess I can say I covered the final "Nationwide Tour" event in Wichita. And I'll be covering the first "Web.com Tour event" here in Evansville. That works, too.

I still feel like I'm going to keep referring to the Tour as the Nationwide Tour. That was its name ever since I started following golf, and I have talked about the "Nationwide Tour" countless times in conversation. It's going to be weird to adjust.

It took me 10 years to explain to friends what the Nationwide Tour was. Hopefully it doesn't take another 10 to explain the transition. And especially since "Nationwide" didn't necessarily imply a title sponsor, it might be tricky to explain that the Web.com Tour is indeed the same tour.

But Web.com? Welcome to the world of golf. I know the Tour wanted a new title sponsor badly, and I'm really happy it got one. Most importantly, the 10-year sponsorship should help the Tour's financial position for a while.

Now the name "Nationwide" gets lumped with the names Nike, Hogan, and Buy.com, as past sponsors of the Triple-A circuit. Very weird.

The times, they are a-changin'.

June 28, 2012

Uresti early leader after nearly flawless 65

New course, new tour name.

Maybe it's a new beginning for Omar Uresti.

The journeyman pro has been struggling for the past few months, having missed four of his last five cuts on the Nationwide Tour. But despite missing the cut last week in Wichita, the Texan didn't feel that bad about his game, and he thought he could have easily made the cut if a few things went his way.

"Missing the cut last week was actually kind of strange," Uresti said. "Because I played pretty well; I just didn't get anything out of it."

So Uresti teed off Thursday morning at Victoria National feeling like he could compete this week, especially on a layout that rewards keeping the ball in the fairway, one of his major strengths. The Texas grad and advocate got off to a good start with birdies on four of his first six holes, made a few putts on his final nine, and got up and down for par when he needed to.

After rolling in an 8-footer for birdie on the par-5 9th, Uresti signed for a round of 7-under 65, and was all smiles. And why wouldn't he be? The 42-year-old holds a two-stroke lead over the field after the first round of the United Leasing Championship.

"I'm very happy with the way it all turned out," Uresti said. "I got off to a good start, and just a pretty good, solid round of golf."

Teeing off on hole 10, Uresti's initial surge up the leaderboard started on hole 13. After hitting his approach on the par-4 to the back fringe, Uresti rolled in a 20-footer to get to 2-under on the day.

On the next hole, a long uphill dogleg-right par-4, Uresti short-sided himself off the tee. His ball was in the fairway, but he would have to hit a hard cut around trees if he wanted to attack the flag.

But Uresti was feeling good about his game, so he went for it. He executed it perfectly, with the ball hitting the front of the green and rolling to inside 5 feet.

"Had to hit a cut shot with a 4-iron around there," Uresti said. "It landed just perfect on the green, caught the slope, and just fed up there."

From there, Uresti was rolling.

Uresti missed the fairway on holes 1 and 6, and he was forced to lay up just short of the green on both occasions. Each time, he chipped to inside 8 feet, making the par putts and keeping his momentum rolling.

Even after his one mishap, he was able to sustain momentum. On the second hole, Uresti hit a wedge approach that landed 20 feet past the hole and spun back to inside 3 feet. The putt was a slippery one, and Uresti couldn't get it to fall.

"That was a weird thing," Uresti said. "I felt like I hit a decent putt, but it was kind of weird. I took the putter back, and right before I started my through stroke, my putter got stuck on the grass."

But the veteran knew that 4-under was still a great score at that point, and he rebounded to finish well and open a lead. Uresti made solid two-putt pars on the

3rd and 4th, and sunk a 45-footer up the hill for birdie on 5 that put him 5-under on the round.

The two-time Web.com Tour champion saw his name high on a leaderboard at that point - which got the adrenaline pumping, he would admit - but channeled the positive energy to birdie his last two holes. A hard-breaking left-to-right 15-footer on 8 produced a series of fist pumps, and a solid up-and-down at the 9th left Uresti in great position for the rest of the week.

The heat was a factor even in the morning, and Uresti knows the weather is sure to pose a challenge on Friday. But he said he is ready to go, and happy to start tomorrow's play at 7-under par.

"It's finally nice to be one of those guys that puts that number up," Uresti said. "I wasn't expecting it."

June 29, 2012

Beisser makes first career cut after sizzling 65

Last year, Benoit Beisser spent some time traveling the mini-tours with a friend, playing a handful of events on the Dakotas Tour (which travels through the Midwest).

Beisser said they had the time of their lives, putting more than 3,800 miles on the car and even teeing up balls in the middle of the highway on occasion.

Before this week, in seven years as a professional after graduating from Arizona State, Beisser had played a grand total of four PGA Tour-affiliated events - going 0-for-2 in cuts made on the PGA Tour, and 0-for-2 (both this year) on the Web.com Tour.

And after an opening 76 left him four back of the cut line, there was no reason for Beisser to think that this week would be any different. Especially considering he had never broken par on either the PGA Tour or Web.com Tour, and that he would need to shoot 5-under on Friday to make the cut.

But despite Thursday's struggles, Beisser felt positive about his game, and it showed. The Arizona State product went out Friday afternoon and shot a bogey-free 7-under 65, vaulting up the leaderboard from T107 all the way into the top 25.

"I knew I had to do it," Beisser said. "I shot 4-over yesterday and I played good; I just had two bad swings. I knew if I eliminated that, I was playing good enough that I could get it going out here."

Beisser birdied five holes in a six-hole stretch from 12 thru 17, moving from three outside the cut line to well within it. So after seven years as a pro (he is currently playing the lower-level Gateway Tour), Beisser will earn his first-ever Web.com Tour paycheck here in Indiana.

"I made a good par on 11, kind of jump-started me again," Beisser said. "Then I just ran four off in a row, so I was like, 'all right, here we go'."

And if he had played a little better on Thursday, who knows? He might have attacked the course differently, without the mentality necessary to produce a 65. The tone was set early: after hitting his 3-wood off the first tee Thursday, Beisser opted for the driver in round two.

"When you know you've got to shoot low, you take more chances," Beisser said.

"I just went with the attitude, 'either score or go home.' Luckily, I scored."

Saturday, Beisser will play on the weekend for the first time on the Web.com Tour - after many years of toiling in lower-level leagues, waiting for his chance to play bigger events and make an impact.

His conditional status on tour (earned through making it to the 2011 Q-School finals) had only earned him a spot in one event up to this point (he Monday qualified for another), and Beisser made it into this week's field by way of a sponsor exemption given to the leading point winner of a three-event series on the Gateway Tour.

Beisser won two of the events, and here he is. Now he has a chance to guarantee a spot at the Utah Championship (in two weeks) with a top-25 finish here.

Not easy, sure. But he's within the top 25 now, and playing the weekend at Victoria National surely beats another week on the Gateway Tour (no offense to the Gateway Tour).

"Who knows what tomorrow will bring, but I'm happy with tonight, and I'm happy with how I've been playing." Beisser said. "So I've just got to keep it going for the rest of the weekend."

Congratulations, Benoit. You deserve it.

Beisser shot 71-76 on the weekend to finish T46, earning \$2,172.50. He played two more events in 2012, making one cut, but has not made it into an event field yet in 2013.

June 29, 2012

Afternoon adventure, Gonzo style

So here I am, lying in my Quality Inn bed, heat-exhausted and slightly sunburned, as my brother and his friend hang out with kids in the room across the hall.

I planned to follow Omar Uresti's round and write a game story on it tonight (considering Uresti led by two strokes after the opening round). And I almost accomplished the task. I made it through 14 holes with Omar despite the heat, and I was all prepared to write the story, even though he was having a rough round at 3-over on the afternoon.

But events transpired, and I would not be able to interview Omar after the round. So without talking to Omar, I felt like writing a game story wouldn't be the best idea, especially considering the unexpected surprise of late Friday afternoon.

So here goes, I'm going to tell the story of my afternoon just as it happened, as a narrative.

After talking to Kevin Johnson and grabbing a few drinks for my brother and his friend, I headed to the first tee to follow Uresti. Alex and friend were prepared to watch Omar for much of the round, especially considering Alex was happy to see Omar in the lead.

Uresti quickly dropped out of the lead, with a sloppy bogey at 1 and a missed birdie opportunity on 2. But his highlight came at the 3rd, as a pinpoint drive and laser-like approach to 10 feet left him with a good look at eagle, which he rolled in. Just like that, Uresti was at 8-under on the week and in the solo lead again.

But things quickly turned sour for the Texan. An approach at the 4th rolled 30 feet past the hole, leaving Uresti with a near-impossible putt that required using a slope. I don't think he had any chance to lag it to even five feet. Three putts later, Uresti was back to even-par on the day.

The next hole was no better, and Uresti failed to get up-and-down from a greenside bunker, leading to his third bogey in just five holes.

The positive at that point? We decided to drink from the players' water cooler on the sixth tee, which probably saved me from heat exhaustion, looking back on the day.

Soon enough, playing companion Brenden Pappas had seen quite enough.

Struggling with his ball control off the tee all week, Pappas reached a breaking point when he missed a 4-footer on the sixth green. Before anyone in the crowd realized what had happened, Pappas started hitting the ball while it was moving, bringing gasps from the decent-sized gallery.

A hole later, Pappas was disqualified.

Uresti made it to the 9th tee at just one-over on the round despite struggling for most of it, and he had a good chance to get back into red figures with birdies on the par-5 9th and 10th. But the veteran failed to birdie either, missing putts inside 10 feet on both, and this seemed to drain the energy out of him.

Sure enough, Uresti hit a poor tee shot on 11 and made bogey, and the round was looking bleak. On the 12th green, Uresti's caddy succumbed to the heat as well, and a young (about 25-year old) member of the gallery was called into duty. The funny thing? I didn't even notice the change until the 14th green.

And the 14th green was where the fun began. After Uresti missed a 4-footer for par to fall back to 4-under on the week, I was called over by a rules official. He told me that Brett Wetterich's caddy had heat exhaustion and wondered if I would be willing to fill in.

The next thing I knew, I was shaking Wetterich's hand and strapping his 50-pound bag on my shoulder.

So here I am, now walking down the 15th fairway with Wetterich, a former PGA Tour champion and Ryder Cupper who made over \$3 million on the PGA Tour in 2006. The same Wetterich whom I had just written about on Thursday, about how his sister questioned his commitment to improving as a golfer.

Funny how golf, and life, align.

Talking to Wetterich, I could not help but think about his sister's comments. He told me that he needed a few more big years before he could retire, and I visualized the Cincinnati native sitting content by a fire or on a fishing boat, anywhere but on a golf course.

And it's certainly not as if Wetterich lacks the talent. He crushed his drive so far on the par-5 15th that he only had a 7-iron approach, and he two-putted for birdie. But still, he was 1-over on the event, in need of a few closing birdies if he wanted to make the cut.

I would love to have helped Wetterich out, but knew that my best method of help was to stay out of his way. After all, what could I possibly say to a former Ryder Cupper that would enlighten his plan of attack on the course? So I stayed to the side of the green, offering encouragement when appropriate, and not much else. Wetterich even raked the bunker himself when he hit into the sand off the 16th tee.

Either way, I didn't need to do any 'caddy's work' in order to get the experience. Walking the player's walk from green to tee was something I'll always remember,

especially after attending so many tournaments over the years where I had to stay outside the ropes.

Despite his struggles, Wetterich was engaging in conversation, talking about one of his passions - college basketball. A Cincinnati Bearcats fan, Wetterich expressed the belief that former coach Bob Huggins got a bad rap while at Cincy, maintaining a true graduation rate far higher than had been depicted in the media.

I was also able to get Wetterich to laugh on occasion, which was a good feeling. He enjoyed my story about buying NFL GamePass while I was abroad in London, as well as my perspective on the eternal suffering of the Buffalo Bills. We even had a serious conversation walking up the 17th fairway, about the challenges of providing objective coverage when it's so easy to be nice.

"It's the truth," Wetterich said.

I wish I had the time to take notes while caddying, but I didn't want to take out my phone for fear of a possible rules violation, and carrying the bag did plenty to expend my remaining energy. But plenty of memories remain (now a few hours later), and I'm doing my best to get them down now, so I don't forget.

When playing partner Jeff Cuzzort hooked his tee ball into the left trees on 15, Cuzzort issued an F-bomb and then muttered that he would probably get fined. After Cuzzort flubbed a short chip from tall grass behind the green on 16 (leading to a double bogey), he muttered, "I'll go again, while I'm still hot." It's refreshing to know these types of comments and bitter remarks exist on the professional

level, just as they do in everyday golf. You just need to be close enough to hear it, and I was lucky to have that chance on Friday.

After hitting his tee ball into the water on 17, Wetterich took a drop and hit his third into rough left of the green. After finding his ball, Wetterich said, "You know, I probably would've been done if I didn't find that."

On the 18th tee, playing partner Camilo Benedetti stated that the whole group should finish the hole as fast as possible (none of the three players was positioned to make the cut), and someone joked that they should all tee off at once (they ultimately didn't).

Also on the tee, I asked Wetterich if he was willing to go back to Q-School in the fall to re-acquire full PGA Tour status. At first he looked at me, deadpan, and said, "No, I'm quitting."

Then in all seriousness, the players reflected on how hard it would be for a professional golfer to go and work at a desk job. Bob Heintz's name was mentioned, and there was joking about how Heintz was one of the few who could actually pull off the transition, with his Yale degree. They also laughed about how every fall, there are plenty of players who (after rough seasons) insist they're giving up on minor-league golf if they don't earn their PGA Tour card through Q-School.

Then, what happens? "At the first event of the year, there they are," Wetterich said.

The only alternative he could come up with? "Maybe I could do some lessons, somehow get people to pay 100 bucks a pop. Tell them their swing looks nice, and on to the next."

All in jest, of course.

Walking up the 18th fairway, I told Wetterich of my running joke with friends about acknowledging the crowd. "Tip your hat to them," he said.

So I raised my hands to the gallery as I approached the green, and the crowd cheered. What a thrill. As miniscule as it may be, I'll never forget it.

Walking to the scoring tent, Wetterich told me to meet him in front of the clubhouse. Along the way, I saw Omar's caddy (looking fine, despite being unable to complete his duties in the heat), and asked him what he thought about Omar's struggles.

His caddy (who said he is a friend of Omar's, temporarily filling in) said he's actually kind of happy that Uresti is a few shots back now, as he won't have to deal with the pressures of the lead.

When I met Wetterich at his car, I introduced him to Alex (an aspiring golfer) and asked if he could give Alex any advice in regard to his golf game. Wetterich told him to practice distance control (particularly from 100 yards and in), to make sure that he gives himself plenty of birdie chances when the opportunities arise.

Wetterich thanked me, and he left us with a parting gift of two hats and two dozen Titleist Pro V1X golf balls (brother Nick, don't even think about it). I told Wetterich I would try to catch up with him at an event somewhere down the road.

"Sounds good," Wetterich called back to me, as he headed to his car, off to his next stop in the always-changing world of professional golf. Maybe he'll get his A-game back soon, and maybe he won't. But if one thing is for certain, we can expect to see him in competition for plenty of years to come.

Because until he has enough money to retire, he knows he wants nothing to do with a day job.

And I can't say I blame him.

Wetterich rebounded from the missed cut in Evansville to make six of his last nine cuts in 2012, including a T4 at the WNB Golf Classic in Midland, TX. His \$44,365 in earnings was not enough to give him full Web.com Tour status for 2013, though, and he has only entered two events as of April 24.

Chapter IV: Springfield

August 6, 2012

Cross another one off the bucket list

No other words can describe it: I'm realizing a dream this week.

Somewhere along the near 20-hour drive from my friend's house in New Brunswick, New Jersey to Springfield, Missouri, the magnitude of it all struck me. I will be caddying for a professional golfer, for a full week, in a professional event. Me, the kid who obsessively followed golf leaderboards online growing up, to the point of asking high school teachers to check scores for me and throwing parties based on how well certain players did.

The kid who lived golf and breathed golf growing up, making it a hobby that far exceeded any other passion, especially between the ages of about 13 and 16.

Wow.

At late June's tournament in southern Indiana, when Kevin Johnson mentioned the possibility of caddying for him sometime this summer, the idea didn't quite hit me. Maybe I didn't really think it could be true. After all, how could I possibly expect to really have the chance to do something that I have always dreamed of doing? The key word there being 'dreamed.' After reading plenty of books and articles about caddies and caddying, I always visualized the concept of helping a pro golfer in the heat of battle, debating club selection and reading greens.

As Rick Reilly says in his book 'Who's Your Caddy?' what other sport allows a non-participant to engage so closely in the action? None.

So when Johnson told me to email him about caddying later in the summer, I was excited, but cautious not to get my hopes up. After all, who would give up his

regular caddie for a week, for a college kid whose caddying experience is limited to helping a friend at small-scale local events?

Apparently Kevin Johnson. He quickly offered me the loop for this week's event in Springfield, and I couldn't believe it. The excitement quickly began, along with periods of nervousness when I worried about my lackluster greens-reading skills. If I can't figure out the break on a 6-footer at my local par-3 course that I have played nearly a thousand times, how can I be expected to decipher greens complexities at a professional-level course? With money at stake, to boot.

Then again, Johnson knows what he's getting himself into. The veteran that he is, he can't be expecting me to burst on the bag with all the answers. Caddying seems like a thing that takes experience to master - developing keen instincts and a special knowledge of how to figure out courses. I can take comfort in my inexperience, but without settling for mediocrity. I'll do my best, knowing that's all I can do.

Another thing I have going for me? After playing so much golf over the years, I have a solid knowledge of the game, even though I can't really play it that well. Despite an inconsistent swing that produces a wide variety of inefficient shots, I can score fairly well based on my feel for the game, probably acquired as I played multiple rounds a day when I was 14 and 15 years old. Maybe that feel will translate well into a professional caddying role, helping Johnson decide how to play certain shots.

Then again, maybe he won't ask for any help at all. And that would be just fine. Just the chance to be inside the ropes is more than I could ever ask for, as a student journalist working on a project, and as a golfer and golf fan.

Not to mention the chance to acknowledge and interact with the crowd. Attending tournaments growing up, I always vowed to enjoy the crowd if I ever had the chance to be inside the ropes. Now is my chance.

Not completely sure what's in store, which makes for a few nerves right about now. Then again, that's what makes it exciting.

August 6, 2012

Caddying in Triple-A Golf: Day 1

As I was making the short 10-minute drive from my hotel to Highland Springs CC, the nerves started to kick in. I was finally here, about to start my week of caddying for a professional golfer. Not for a friend in a district event, with nothing more than pride and recognition at stake. Big money on the line. Over \$100,000.

I promptly made two wrong turns, and it took me almost 20 minutes to take the drive that should have taken six according to my GPS. I even drove completely past the course, with the course in clear sight to my right. Nice job, KP.

From there, things improved. I found the caddy lot easily once I entered the club gates, and caddy parking was a little bit closer than I had envisioned. I was

bracing myself for a half-hour walk to the range, and it was really only 5-7 minutes or so. Can't complain. By then, I was even getting used to the heat.

So I made the trek to the range, where Kevin Johnson (now to be referred to as KJ) told me to meet him. I found him holding court on the left side of the lower section of the range, telling stories with Charles Warren and his caddy. I had always read about how players like to chat it up during the early practice days, and this confirmed the reports. Hanging out right next to them, listening to stories about various vagabond caddies, was pretty cool. Warren asked me to keep most of it off the record, and I will oblige.

All I can say is, caddying is definitely a unique lifestyle, especially on the Triple-A circuit. Traveling from place to place, week after week, carrying a heavy bag in sometimes oppressive heat. Knowing that you won't get paid too well unless your guy notches a high finish, which is rare for plenty of the competitors on the circuit. It takes a special type of person to commit to the lifestyle for a long period of time, and I respect those who make the commitment.

Warren's caddy, Joe, was the first one I met. Joe has also caddied for Tripp Isenhour and Kent Jones on the professional circuits, and was willing to chat with me about some of the particulars of caddying in the big leagues. His main message? Make sure not to step in the through line (anywhere in a direct line between a player's ball and the hole, even past the hole). Joe told me about a Tour pro who stepped in another player's through line (he didn't realize he was doing

anything wrong), and an argument that ensued. I had better make sure to remember the through line all week.

Joe said he has caddied for about 15 years out on Tour, so he surely knows what he's talking about. For him to be completely willing to chat with me, a novice caddy, was appreciated.

Joe and I had our discussion at the caddy registration tent, where I signed a registration form and received my caddy badge. Just like that, I was an official caddy on the Web.com Tour, if only for a week. I hope I don't lose that badge.

After the discussion with Joe, I headed back to KJ's post, where he was working his way through his irons. We talked a bit as he was warming up, and he gave me a few pointers on caddying. He instructed me on how much to wet his towel before cleaning his clubs, and he showed me the proper slot in the bag for each of his clubs. He said I would be tested eventually. Wonder what happens if I fail the test.

We talked a bit about life on Tour, and about the fine line between making the big tour and toiling in the minors. KJ has had status on the Web.com Tour since 1996, with six wins to his credit, but has only had full PGA Tour status for two full seasons. He spoke fondly of a week at the Bob Hope where he went low and finished more than 20-under, but also reflected on how he never really played too well when he had the chance to play in the big leagues.

In 2009, KJ won twice on the Web.com (then the Nationwide) circuit, more than enough to gain PGA Tour status for 2010. He shot 18-under and 20-under in those two weeks and said he felt those weeks would have placed him high against PGA Tour competition. He said it's not as if he thinks Web.com courses are better for his game. It's just a matter of timing, playing well at certain times and poorly at others. Maybe if he gets another chance to play in the big leagues, the timing will align.

While on the range, KJ instructed me to go to the TaylorMade trailer, where I could get a few hats to wear during the week as his caddy. I went into the trailer, where the TaylorMade rep was gracious and polite, and got the hats. Later, KJ talked to the rep and told me the rep was taken aback by my politeness. He said most caddies wouldn't be as polite.

From there, we headed to lunch - KJ to the players' locker room, and me to the caddying tent. He told me to meet him at the putting green about a half hour later.

I showed up at the putting green 29 minutes later. I was late. KJ was waiting for me, ready to tee off, since the 10th tee was wide open for play. Oops. Despite my mistake, he was kind enough to grab me a sandwich, even though he knew I had already had lunch in the caddy tent. I threw the sandwich in the bag for later.

On the tee, he gave me a few more instructions: stand on the right side of the tee box, never grab a club for him before he makes a decision (it can cause

conflicting or confusing thoughts), and clean all irons soon after each shot. Easy enough, right?

By the end of the nine holes, I had broken every rule, inadvertently of course.

He also told me that he would trust himself with all yardages, and that I wouldn't have to worry about club selection or reading greens. For this, I was relieved, and thankful. He had actually mentioned the yardage part back on the range, where Joe joked that he should've pretended I would be solely responsible, so that I would have a few sleepless nights leading up to the competition.

In that regard, he wouldn't have been kidding. I would have been nervous as hell.

KJ explained how to calculate yardages, which involves a few quick additions and subtractions based on pacing off from yardage markers, accounting for distance between the hole and the front of the green, elevation changes, and so on. Seems simple, but it must be easy to make a quick mistake.

He told me that one time, his caddy gave him the wrong yardage to a hole over water. He hit a perfect shot and watched in surprise as the ball made a splash. KJ got on his caddy for making the mistake, but to his surprise, the caddy stuck up for himself by saying he felt just as bad (if not worse) about the mistake. The caddy told him that there was no use arguing now. The damage was done, and all they could do was finish the round strong. This was on a Friday, and KJ listened to his caddy, finishing well and making the cut.

In any case, good thing I won't be solely responsible for yardages. KJ told me he always checks yardage along with his caddy, and the two compare findings before a final yardage is determined. He told me that the worst caddy is a "yes-man" caddy, where the caddy will go along with a number even if he thinks it's wrong, just because he doesn't want to upset his boss. He also said the best type of caddy is someone who is confident and unwavering in his decisions, and someone who has the knack to keep his man calm under the pressures of late-round contention. KJ told me that adrenaline kicks in during times of contention, causing things to speed up and making it harder to focus. A good caddy is someone who can counteract this type of pressure as much as possible. With indecision being the root of much stress, a confident caddy becomes even more important in this regard.

On the 11th tee, KJ hit a good drive that was positioned well in the fairway, just past some trees and well short of a fairway bunker. He told me how the body can react differently during the adrenaline rush of tournament play, and how the bunkers could become in play during a tournament round. He referred to this as 'Monday lethargy,' saying it's hard to get too amped up for nine practice holes, three days before the meaningful play gets under way. Can't blame him.

On the par-3 13th, KJ hit a shot to the right of the green, the ball settling in rough between the green and a pond. He again referred to the shot as a 'Monday swing.'

Throughout the round, KJ would frequently play multiple chip shots and hit multiple putts, aiming to different portions of the green where he anticipated hole

locations would be. After so many years on Tour, one gets a sense of where the course staff will set up the course, and it is possible to figure out a general idea regarding the setup.

KJ hadn't played this event in a few years, due to its place in a logical summer vacation slot on the schedule, but he was confident that the course hadn't changed too much during his time away. For the most part, he was right, familiar with the setup and how to play certain shots. Approaching the tee on one of the finishing par-4s, he told me I could hand him his driver and walk up to the fairway to meet him. This, while we were still leaving the green on the previous hole, before he even had a chance to examine the setup from the tee box.

Sure enough, driver was the right play, and he left himself with a mid-iron into the green from the right side of the fairway.

The only slight change was on the par-4 12th, where the tees had been moved back from where he previously remembered. On a hole with water guarding the right side of the fairway and a bunker on the left, he said that 3-wood used to be the play, but that now maybe driver was the right call. He told me he hits his 3-wood about 30 yards less than he hits his driver.

Along the way, he scattered more advice: Keep a wedge handy during practice rounds in case he wants to chip, constantly wet the towel so clubs can be cleaned well at any time, immediately put the putter cover on after he's done with the putter (as a putter is dinged easily).

All in all, a lot to remember. We're playing a practice round tomorrow with Fran Quinn, a fellow pro with whom KJ played junior golf in the Boston area growing up. KJ texted me tonight and told me to be ready on the range at 6:45 a.m. Looks like we're getting out early to beat the heat, which works for me. Pairings for Thursday and Friday will be announced tomorrow as well, so it will be fun to see who we'll be playing with. Hopefully not anyone too intimidating.

As we finished up, KJ spoke fondly of his newfound enjoyment of fishing, after remarking that the pond guarding the 18th green holds plenty of fish. We finished up, and he gave me a ride back to the caddy lot in his rental car, which happened to be a pickup truck. Go figure.

Earlier in the day, at the range, I was talking about my inconsistent golf game and hacksaw swing. KJ told me to step up and take a swing, with his 7-iron, to see what I had. I made decent contact, but the ball quickly hooked left. Oh, well. At least I'm not claiming to play scratch or anything of the sort.

Hopefully over the course of the week, KJ avoids shots resembling my whack at the range. If so, maybe he can contend coming down the stretch. If that's the case, maybe I'll be able to see how my caddying chops measure up in the heat of the moment.

Nah, who am I kidding? I'll just be trying to stay out of the way.

August 11, 2012

Caddying in Triple-A Golf: Tourney Round 2

I pick up the action on Friday, the day of the second tournament round. KJ shot 3-under in the first tournament round, and the cut line after the first round was 4-under.

We started Friday off at the putting green, just like we had done on Thursday. On our walk over, KJ relayed a story about a time at the Web.com event in Miami, which is about an hour and a half from his home in Palm Beach Gardens.

KJ had received a new shirt with Clemson colors - featuring orange, of course - which he loved from first glance. He couldn't wait to wear the shirt in tournament play.

There was one problem, though. KJ only likes to wear his school colors on Sunday, and he had suffered through a series of missed cuts late in the year. Miami was the last full-field event of the year, his last chance to wear the shirt until the next season.

Naturally, he made the cut. Miami is close enough to his home that he will stay at home the night before if he has a late tee time, but will stay close to the course if he has to play relatively early. This particular Sunday in Miami, his tee time was early enough that he decided to stay by the course. He brought the shirt with him, without any other shirt, on Saturday night.

Of course, in his excitement to make a cut and wear the shirt on Sunday, KJ had failed to actually try the shirt on, up to this point. So to his surprise, when he put the shirt on before heading to the course, he realized a slight problem: It was too tight.

"It said it was a large," KJ said. "Must have been a kid's large."

But without any other shirts, KJ had no other choice. He went to the course to warm up, wearing the shirt. When friend Pat Sheehan saw him on the putting green, remarking about the choice of attire, he knew he was in trouble.

When best friend on Tour Fran Quinn saw him, there was no more room for kidding around. Quinn insisted that KJ change his shirt. When KJ told him that he didn't have another shirt, Quinn insisted that he would go and get him one.

KJ resisted at first, but eventually relented. So much for the prized shirt, long-saved for a Sunday appearance.

So the shirt now has a prominent place in the Johnson household. Right, KJ?

"Nah," KJ said. "I gave it away."

Maybe some junior golfer is wearing it now, as we speak.

After we completed our putting session, we made our way to the range for a final warm-up. Along the way, I relayed my knowledge acquired throughout the week

that some caddies seem to be secretive, not wanting the possibility of any semblance of media attention. KJ seemed to know where I was coming from.

"Now, this is just my opinion," KJ said. "My personal opinion. But I feel that a lot of these guys, especially out here (on the Web.com circuit), are here because they're running from something. Just my personal opinion."

Hmm. Could be. On the whole, they all seem like good guys who enjoy what they do. But as for their personal lives, the week certainly hasn't revealed anything to me.

And I'm certainly in no position to expect anything more.

On the range, things went fairly well. I got the towel wet, grabbed the dry golf balls for the long clubs, and cleaned the clubs after he finished using them.

But when he grabbed the towel to dry himself off for the first time, I realized something was wrong. I had over-soaked the towel in the water cooler, and the whole thing was saturated. More than half of the towel is supposed to remain dry. Oops.

At least I wet the towel in the cooler, rather than in the more conveniently located bucket. It was the first thing he told me on Monday, and the one thing I will be sure to never forget as a caddy.

"See, you're learning," KJ said.

Just before we had to head to the tee, KJ had a new task for me, filming his swing. With a family vacation to the Bahamas imminent, he figured he could use some footage to look at while hanging out on the beach.

So I fumbled around with his iPhone at first, trying to figure out how to get the thing set to record. Too bad my brothers (who both have iPhones) weren't there to help me.

"Hey, it's part of the job," KJ said.

Finally, I figured it out, and took footage from two different angles of KJ hitting a driver, an iron, and a wedge. I even got some credit afterward; he looked at my film job, and told me "good job."

From there, we proceeded from the range toward the tee, without realizing that he left his 4-iron on the range.

I quickly went back to retrieve it.

We made it to the tee box in one piece, where we greeted playing partners Brad Elder and Andres Gonzales. Elder was at 1-under par and would need a low score to make the cut. Gonzales was 3-under, right there with us, figuring that the cut would move from 4-under to either 5- or 6-under.

We hit our tee shots and strolled down the first fairway. Then Gonzales had a question for me: he called over and asked if I wrote about Thursday's round in the blog.

"Of course," I told him. "I even mentioned you a bit, too."

He knew exactly what I wrote about him, as well.

"You wrote about how good-looking I am," he said.

"Of course."

But then, he thought about it and realized he was wrong.

"No, that's not it," he said. "You wrote about how INCREDIBLY good-looking I am."

Spot-on, Andres.

Loosened up by the knowledge of his sex appeal, Gonzales went on to birdie his first three holes to quickly jump inside the cut line. After rolling in a 10-footer for birdie on 2, Gonzales looked at me and gave a mini Tiger-esque fist pump.

The good mood continued to the 3rd tee, where his caddy Brandon was talking about how he has been trying to write a letter to Yeti, a mountain-bike manufacturer. Brandon likes to wear Yeti hats and was trying to work on a letter asking for a sponsorship.

But Brandon was struggling with a draft, and reflecting on the challenge as we waited on the tee. This compelled me to bring up my major in journalism, offering to help him out if I could.

This brought Gonzales to ask me what my major was.

"Broadcast?"

"Nope," I said. "Print."

This brought Gonzales (also a print journalism major) over for yet another high-five, one of many on the week.

Along with a quick - yet loud - cheer for his alma mater, UNLV.

"Go Rebels," he cried.

Unfortunately for KJ, the putts weren't falling like they were for Andres. We hit it close on holes 1 and 2, inside 10 feet both times, but couldn't roll in the birdie looks. On 3 we had another chance, about 25 feet, but couldn't get it to fall. Then we missed the green on 4 and made bogey, falling back to 2-under on the week. Suddenly, we were way outside the cut line - three, maybe even four shots back.

We needed to make something happen, and soon.

Along the way, we got to talking about injuries, and how they can derail a career. KJ said his brother Chip (a good player in his own right, a club pro who has played in several majors) has been hurt almost everywhere on his body, making consistent play a challenge.

This led KJ to recount a shoulder injury he suffered in 1996, his first year on Tour. KJ and his college roommates (including fellow pro Brett Quigley) like to

go on a hunting trip for a few days every year, in the South Carolina Lowcountry near Charleston. They like to hunt on foot in the morning, and on horseback in the afternoon.

One afternoon, KJ and his friends were on horseback, with KJ riding the third horse. Suddenly, the first horse fell, leading off a chain reaction that led to horses falling down the line.

KJ's horse fell, and in a way that launched him off the horse. KJ fell in an unlucky way that caused him to injure his shoulder. Just like that, he had to take some time off, in his first year with a chance to play against high-level competition.

Nobody is immune to injury, not even Tiger Woods. For KJ, the incident on horseback was just an unfortunate break, and he has rebounded to stay free of serious injury for a good part of the past 16 years. Aside from an injury-related eight-month layoff in 2002, KJ hasn't had a major layoff since.

I also asked KJ if the Web.com Tour maintains a fitness trailer, as I know they do on the big tour.

He gave me a look as if I'm crazy.

The 4th is a par-3 that measures over 200 yards, and we experienced a minor backup when we arrived at the tee on Friday. This allowed for some discussion, and we talked about how some players give me in-depth, insightful answers in interviews, while I'm lucky to get more than a sentence out of others.

KJ agreed and compared the trend to his own daughters, ages 12 and 9. KJ's 12-year-old is named Jordan, and his 9-year-old is named Jade.

KJ tries to call his house each night before bed, to talk to his wife and daughters. He laughed when telling me of the dichotomy that exists between conversations with his daughters.

When he talks with Jordan, she will meticulously recount the details of the day - things that happened, ups and downs, and so on. The conversation can last for many minutes. On the other hand, he is lucky to get a minute out of Jade.

According to KJ, the conversation with Jade can go something like this:

KJ: How was your day?

Jade: Good.

What are you doing now?

Nothing.

Anything exciting happen today?

Nope.

And so on.

As we walked up the 5th, I asked KJ if there are any particular tournaments that he enjoys attending. I figured that after so many years on Tour, there would be certain stops that would stand out.

At first, nothing. Then after he thought about it, he talked about how he enjoys certain aspects of different events - the area in Boise, the people in Greenville, the course in Rochester (Irondequoit, where the Tour no longer plays), and so on. He said he also enjoyed the (now-defunct) Wayne Gretzky tournament in Canada, about two hours north of Toronto. One year, he took the family to the event, and they drove past Niagara Falls along the way.

After asking the question, I made another consideration: the Tour lifestyle isn't exactly conducive for much sightseeing or going out at any particular tournament site.

"Not if you want to play well," KJ said.

This allowed me to reflect on my experience this summer, where I have traveled to tournament sites across the country - Greenville, Wichita, Evansville, now Springfield. How much sightseeing do I actually do in each place? Not much. Between time spent on the course, and writing afterward, I'm pretty much wiped out when I'm done with my day's work. When I'm done, I don't have the energy to do much else. I just want to eat and relax.

Besides, when I'm by myself, do I really want to go hit the bars and clubs and start dancing?

"Exactly," KJ said.

Same type of thing for these guys, who generally travel without their families most weeks (although some load the RV and bring the family in tow).

The reason isn't because they want to travel alone. It's because they want to keep their family's best interests at heart.

"If I want to play well, I need to be at the course most of the day," KJ said. "It's work. It's a business."

And KJ isn't naïve. He knows that there isn't exactly much to do in most Web.com towns. On the big tour, which visits plenty of big cities, there is much more to do, along with an event planner on staff.

No event planners out here.

We progressed adequately, making pars up until the 8th hole, where we knew we needed to start make something happen. The 8th is a dogleg-left par-5, reachable with a good drive, and we really needed to make birdie here, par at the worst.

Things became more difficult after a pulled drive left us with about 220 yards to the flag - but with trees in the way, not to mention a pond guarding the green.

Going for it was out of the question, and we would use a sand wedge to lay up.

The ball easily cleared the trees, but the wedge sailed too far, landing on a downslope about 10 feet short of the pond. Nearly a complete disaster, but still a

mini-disaster. We now had a poor angle to the pin, and a downhill lie that would make it difficult to generate the necessary spin.

Needless to say, KJ wasn't happy.

"You can't miss the fairway with a sand wedge," KJ said.

So we had no choice but to play it relatively safe, and the ball sailed over the green. A poor chip left us with an 18-footer for par, which we missed to fall to 1-under on the event - way, way back of the cut line. For the first time, it occurred to me that making the cut would be a challenge.

We needed to step it up.

Par on 9, and we headed to the 10th knowing that a 31 on the back (32 at worst) would be needed to make the cut. After a poor approach on the 10th, we were short of the green, knowing that we absolutely had to get the ball up and down. To make matters worse, KJ had appeared shaky with his chipping all day, not good when you know that a poor chip is not an option.

But we came through and knocked it inside 3 feet, for an easy par.

"Why can't we do that all the time?" KJ remarked.

After a two-putt birdie on the par-5 11th, we were off and running - still alive, but knowing there was a long way to go.

After missing a 12-footer on 12 and making par, we headed to the 13th, where we started talking about some of the better-known names in golf. Knowing Justin Leonard's reputation as a low-ball hitter, and knowing that Texas is known for having a golf climate that forces players to keep it low, I asked if the idea of Texas pros keeping the ball low holds water.

"Yeah, kind of," KJ said. "But Leonard's swing is a big reason for that (his low ball flight), too."

And I couldn't help but notice the ball flight of Elder (who played his college golf at Texas) being sky-high.

Makes you realize that stereotypes aren't always completely true.

The discussion led us to Lee Trevino. I thought I had read that Trevino was known for hitting a massive draw. But when I brought this up, I was corrected.

"Nope," KJ said. "He's a cutter."

KJ happened to have a story to share about Trevino, as well. The day before the finals of Q-School in 1995, KJ was working on his putting with the pro at Hobe Sound Golf Club in Florida, where KJ had worked. Although Trevino frequented the club, he and KJ had never before had an actual conversation.

Seeing the pro, Trevino approached the green. The pro introduced KJ, telling him that KJ was getting ready for Q-School finals. The talker that he is, Trevino took a

liking to KJ and went on to initiate a near 90-minute discussion about the putting stroke and its intricacies.

The next day, KJ promptly went on to three-putt a bunch and shoot 78. But KJ stuck with the knowledge passed on by Trevino, and proceeded to 'make almost everything I looked at' for the rest of Q-School, narrowly missing his PGA Tour card but gaining full Web.com Tour (then called the Nike Tour) status.

KJ has retained status on the Triple-A circuit ever since. Lee Trevino, thank you very much.

We went on to par 13, and then 14, putting us in essential must-birdie mode from that point forward. Despite the pressure, KJ was handling everything in stride, knowing that worry is not always the best way to handle adversity.

Discussing the yardage on 15, we came up with a difference of one yard.

Considering I had been accurate with yardages all day, I was slightly confused.

We figured out the discrepancy, though; KJ had adjusted the yardage for the downhill slope by 6 yards, while my book had said 7. He explained that he had acquired this number by use of a laser on some previous occasion, leading us to talk about the art of mastering yardage books.

I knew that veteran Fred Funk's caddy, Mark Long, had worked on yardage books for a variety of events, and I brought this up. KJ agreed, knowing exactly who Mark Long is and having high praise for his yardage books, saying Long's are some of the best.

I asked how yardage books were made before the invention of lasers, knowing that lasers are a relatively recent phenomenon. He told me about a guy named George Lucas who would make yardage books with a fishing line, marking the line with reference points for distances. He said that Lucas is essentially retired by now, but that Lucas' books have been used by plenty of touring professionals.

Fishing line. Good stuff.

KJ hit a nice shot to inside 15 feet, and we headed to the green in discussion about reading greens. He told me that he doesn't like to have caddies read the greens, whether you're Stevie Williams (Tiger's caddy) or Kevin Prise.

He explained that this is because discrepancies can create doubt. In general, you can't expect the caddy and player to have the same read every time, KJ said.

"If the caddy always had the same read, that would be great," KJ said. "But that's just not going to happen."

He said that he had Smiley (his regular caddy) read a few putts early in the year, to see if they had a similar perspective. It wasn't the case, so KJ kept Smiley away from reading the greens from that point forward.

No slight to Smiley, though. KJ just prefers to read his own greens. After all, putting is hard enough. No need for more confusion than there already is.

We missed the putt, bringing us into desperation mode. When we missed a 15-footer on 16, burning the edge for seemingly the hundredth time of the day, it was all but official. We wouldn't be playing the weekend.

"You'd think that when you're aiming at the hole all the time, one would eventually fall in," KJ said.

Walking up the 17th fairway, I asked KJ if he had a best golf memory. With Gonzales rolling up the fairway behind him, the answer should've been obvious.

"Playing these two days with Andres, of course," KJ said.

Andres then recounted a Web.com event in 1996 that took place at his home course in Olympia, Washington. Gonzales got to play in a pro-am as part of a junior golf initiative, and he looks back fondly on the experience.

"The pros would hit a bunch of golf balls in the woods," Gonzales said. "I would run back into the woods and grab the balls."

As it turns out, while KJ was there, he shot the course record, a 64. Despite playing there all the time growing up, Gonzales was never able to match it, nor has anybody else.

"I shot a 65, once," Gonzales said. "It's a tough course."

Must have been pretty tough, considering Gonzales went on to produce a nonchalant Friday 65 here in Springfield.

As for KJ, he did pretty well in Olympia, tying for sixth in 1996 and winning in 1997, his first of six Web.com titles to date.

When we reached the 18th tee, a sizable backup had been created. The hole is a reachable par-5 with water in front of the green, explaining the backup. KJ's buddy Ron Whittaker was on the tee, getting ready to play the hole, needing birdie to make the cut (as it turned out, the cut would indeed be 5-under).

Despite the situation, Whittaker appeared relaxed, and he chatted amiably with KJ before striping a beauty down the fairway.

The talk turned serious in KJ's group when Gonzales brought up the death of Jim Renner's dad. Renner is a fellow Web.com pro, whom Gonzales has become close with over their time on Tour.

Renner was in Springfield on Tuesday and had played nine holes and hit some balls before receiving the call. He immediately flew home. Gonzales will leave for the funeral upon completion of the tournament at Highland Springs, and he will return to play next week in Kansas City.

They also talked about the deaths of their own fathers: KJ's died of skin cancer, and Gonzales' of pancreatic cancer.

"He fought it for two years, which is more than they give you," Gonzales said.

Makes you realize that there's more to life than making and missing cuts.

Speaking of Renner, Gonzales brought up a story about Renner's travails in college. Renner initially enrolled at Oklahoma, where he impressed his mom with a 3.4 GPA to start his collegiate experience.

"She thought I was a genius," Renner told Gonzales.

But things would get tougher the next semester, to the point where Renner became very confused while taking an exam - he didn't know answers to any of the questions. At that point, he made up his mind. He was leaving Oklahoma, and transferring to Johnson and Wales in Miami.

With his decision set, he went up to the professor, handed her the exam, and informed her of his plans.

"I can help you," she said.

"No, I've made up my mind," he replied. "I'm leaving."

"No, I can really help you."

"No, you don't understand. I'm not on the ledge. I'm leaving."

And so he went.

We finished up with a par on the 18th, to finish with a 73, good for a two-day total of 2-under. Not quite good enough to make the cut; we finished three strokes back of where we needed to be.

"Sorry you had such a short-lived experience," KJ told me as we walked off the green. "You outperformed me this week."

I don't quite know about that.

As I was waiting for KJ outside the scoring tent, a lady came up and asked me for my caddy bib. Hoping I could keep it as a souvenir, I asked her so. She wasn't having any of it, probably thinking I was messing with her, and her tone quickly escalated.

At that point, KJ exited the trailer.

"Don't be giving the lady a hard time," he said.

So I backed away. So much for that souvenir. At least I have my yardage book.

We went up to the clubhouse area, where he left me with his clubs and told me he would be back out in a minute. When he returned, we reconvened with Gonzales, who wished me luck.

He also had a proposition for KJ. Gonzales is taking the Pittsburgh event off to visit Nashville with some buddies, and he invited KJ along with him.

"We're going to grab a couple buckets of paint," he said. "Red paint."

I asked what the buckets would be used for.

"To paint the town," Gonzales said. "We're painting it red."

So will KJ bail on next week's family vacation to the Bahamas and play Kansas City next week, so that he can paint up Nashville with Andres?

"Nah," KJ said. "If I did, though, I could play every Tour event for the rest of my life."

Why's that, KJ?

"I'd be single."

As we walked back toward the parking lots, I asked KJ about his plans for the rest of the year. After taking Kansas City off for the Bahamas, he said he is planning to play the rest of the Web.com season all the way through.

That is, of course, unless he wins three in a row to get back out on the big tour.

"I can go from missing the cut to winning, just like that," KJ said.

I asked him to tell me my biggest caddying mistake of the week, anything that I shouldn't have done, or could've done better.

He couldn't think of anything.

"No, you were great," KJ said.

He must be lying.

He dropped me off at my car, and we said our farewells. I thanked him again for the experience, and he told me he would see me at the event in Washington in

October. From there, I packed up, taking everything in - the conversations, the insight, the inside-the-ropes experience that I will likely never have again.

After years of following golf from the outside, I finally had the chance I had always dreamed of: to help a player in a competitive environment, to be a part of a touring pro's week on the circuit. I was finally there, and I didn't even mess up too badly.

Despite my dreams, I had never truly thought I would be lucky enough to have this chance. But here I am. I did it. I caddied for a week on the Web.com Tour. No matter what happens from here on out, nobody can ever take that away from me.

And now, I truly know how it feels to miss a cut.

KJ continued to struggle as he closed out the 2012 season, notching only one top-45 finish in his final eight events. He failed to maintain full Web.com status and has only played in one event so far in 2013, finishing T37 at the Brasil Classic in early April.

August 11, 2012

Uresti struggles, but keeps spirits up

With the 18th tee backed up on Saturday afternoon, Omar Uresti had plenty of reason to be upset. Having started the round in a tie for 5th, two strokes back of

the lead, he was in prime position to put himself in contention for the title on Sunday.

And after making birdie on three of his first five holes to get to 13-under, Uresti had even more reason to believe. He seemed in complete control of his swing, on a course where birdie chances have been plentiful all week.

But from there, things deteriorated in a hurry. Uresti missed make-able birdie efforts on the 6th and 7th, and he hit a poor approach into the pond on the par-5 8th, leading to a bogey.

Uresti birdied 11 but bogeyed 12 (after hitting into a greenside pond again), and then bogeyed 14. Two more short birdie misses on 16 and 17 would have seemingly pushed Uresti over the edge, as he had fallen back to 11-under on the week, outside the top 25.

The Texan had gone from an afternoon tee time in Saturday's third-last group, to the prospect of a very early start on Sunday morning.

Yet while waiting in the shade next to the 18th tee, Uresti saw me and called me over. I turned my head and was surprised to see him look relatively happy considering the circumstances, greeting me with a big smile on his face. I asked how he was doing, and he said, 'OK' - and he sounded it, as well. Heck, if I were him, I probably would have been throwing clubs into a house somewhere.

"The ball just doesn't want to go in," he said.

So true.

In our brief conversation, I asked about his schedule for the rest of the year, and he said he would finish the season on this Tour. This led to talk about new changes to the PGA Tour qualifying structure that are currently being finalized - where Q-School will no longer serve as a direct path to the big leagues. In its place will be a three-tournament series at the end of each season, allowing top Web.com players from the year to compete with PGA Tour players who fail to keep their card, with the top finishers in the series gaining PGA Tour status for the following season.

When I asked Uresti what he thought of the changes, his face hardened.

"Don't like it," he said. "Now when you lose your card, it will take you two years to get back out there (onto the big tour)."

Indeed, players who fail to qualify through the three-event series will have no opportunity to play their way back through Q-School. Then again, it seems like the series is just a new form of conducting Q-School.

But Uresti brings up a good point when talking about college players, and how they will have to go about making the big leagues. A top college prospect will no longer be able to work his way through Q-School to make it to the big tour the year of graduation. Besides the slim possibility of playing your way on through sponsors' exemptions, the reality is that each player will have to make it through

Web.com Tour Q-School, and then play well enough the next season (and/or in the three-event series) to get to the Big Show.

Consequently, Uresti said he thinks top college players may turn pro a year early, with the senior year of college being essentially replaced by a year on the Web.com circuit.

Uresti proceeded to bogey the 18th to complete a poor finish on an even sourer note. The veteran hit his approach into the water just short of the green (again) and took a long time trying to decide whether he could play the shot - to the point of taking off his shoes and stepping into the pond, which elicited a roar from the crowd surrounding the green.

Ultimately, Uresti decided to take a drop, all the way back across the pond. He wedged on and two-putted to complete a disappointing 72.

Still, I was impressed with Uresti's willingness to chat on the tee box, initiating conversation despite the poor play. His position in the tournament may have regressed greatly on Saturday, but this didn't keep me from gaining a large amount of respect for the perennial Web.com pro

Uresti failed to rebound from his poor finish on Saturday, shooting a Sunday 71 and finishing T43. He made 4 of 9 cuts the rest of the year, with a high finish of T35, and finished the year with \$48,001 in earnings. He has not played any events in 2013, as of April 24.

Final Thoughts

September 13, 2012

For here, we can rest safely

One August morning around 4 a.m., I pulled back into my driveway in Orchard Park, New York - completing a 16-hour journey home, and completing my summer of covering golf on the Triple-A circuit.

I woke up that morning at my Extended Stay America hotel in Springfield and cleaned up the room I had made my home for a week. After making sure I didn't leave anything behind, I checked out and headed to the course, with the intention of watching Omar Uresti's round for a while. I planned to watch the whole round if he was playing well, but not if he struggled, as I didn't want to get home TOO late.

I was sort of expecting Uresti to make a Sunday charge, after finishing in such a disappointing fashion on Saturday. But it wasn't meant to be; Uresti made it through the first 10 holes at just even par, on the eminently scoreable Highland Springs track.

When he hooked his drive into the trees on the par-5 11th - cursing to himself, 'Aaaah, Omar!' in the process - I noticed that we were relatively close to the parking lot. I took this as a subtle clue.

And so I hit the road.

Making the seemingly never-ending drive through St. Louis, Indianapolis, Columbus, Cleveland, Erie, and eventually back to Orchard Park, I got to thinking about all the time spent at these tournaments, and what I learned. With so much time spent watching golf over the years, I figured that I had a pretty good idea of life on tour, but I figured there was plenty more I could learn from experiencing it for myself.

Indeed there was. Through my travel patterns - making the drives as the players would, sleeping in the same low-budget motels, spending day after day at the course - I feel that I gained as much of a sense of the life as I possibly could, without actually playing myself. The week caddying was a culmination of sorts, finally getting inside the ropes to see what it's like for the players as they compete.

So after all that, what can I take away from the experience? For one thing, I had certainly glamorized life on tour before actually experiencing it. Despite the public spectrum that these guys find themselves in, they aren't really celebrities at all. They're far from it. True, they get to play a game for a living just like all the famous athletes, but they're doing it on a much smaller scale, and for much less money. The crowds are smaller, the star treatment is nonexistent, and the players don't carry themselves like 'stars' at all. They aren't famous, most of them anyway, no matter what I may have thought growing up.

And just like thousands of people do every Saturday and Sunday across the country, they're just playing golf. They hit good shots, and they hit bad shots

(albeit many more good shots than the average player) and live with the consequences. Unlike on the PGA Tour, they aren't necessarily living and dying with every shot from a monetary perspective, unless they're in contention on Sunday afternoon.

The PGA Tour is a show. The Web.com Tour is a workplace, where people grind every day to make a living. If you don't do well on the Web.com Tour, you have a hard time getting by.

One good week on the PGA Tour can be enough for a family to live for the year. On the Web.com Tour, you need sustained weeks of solid play to build up the money reserves. Not the same, by any stretch.

Not to say the PGA Tour isn't real, but the Web.com Tour is truly authentic, a representation of the everyman's struggle. You don't get rich playing average golf on the Web.com Tour.

That's what makes it appealing, and a reason why these guys aren't stars. They're pro athletes, but they don't live the lives associated with the stereotype of a pro athlete. Some may have nice cars, some may have boats, sure. But the luxuries are associated with trade-offs. The money supply isn't endless.

They play because they love the game, and they stop when they realize they don't love it enough anymore. Bob Heintz has a Yale degree, but he toiled in the minors for years because he knew of no other job that would make him as happy. And he

still had that driving force, the belief that he had the ability - somewhere, deep down - to succeed in the big leagues.

But eventually, he ran out of gas. Heintz officially retired this summer after the Midwest Classic, taking the job as head coach at Penn. The travel will still exist, with matches and recruiting trips, but the income will be stable. With a family to support, that's the most important thing for Heintz.

Heintz is done, but there are plenty of new young golfers fresh out of college, eager and ready to take his place. The PGA Tour needs players for the future, and many of them will come from the Web.com Tour. Just like the minors produce the next wave of star hockey and baseball players, the Web.com Tour gets players ready for the life of a PGA Tour golfer, so they can handle the life once they get to the grand stage.

Maybe they'll make it to the top, and maybe they won't. If they don't, they can keep toiling away on the Web.com Tour, waiting for their best golf to come to the surface.

And who knows? Maybe in a few years, Heintz will be back. The golf bug doesn't go away easily.

Conclusion

I had planned for my caddying adventure in Springfield to be the last stop on my summer trek through the Web.com Tour. But when I learned that a good friend

from high school would be studying in Washington, D. C. for the fall, knowing that the Tour had an event near Washington in October, I saw an opportunity. I would go to the event as a fan, and I would get a chance to touch base with guys such as Kevin Johnson without feeling the need to interview or report.

So I asked a few friends from Syracuse to join me, and we hit the road for the seven-hour journey to Washington, now the final stop on my tour. We had a great weekend sightseeing and catching up with friends from home, and the tournament was just one of many aspects on the trip. I was able to introduce my friends to Johnson, who jokingly recounted various misadventures from my week on the bag. The weather in Washington was windy and cold, with highs in the upper 40s and low 50s on the weekend, making me long for the days back in Springfield when 90 degrees would have seemed chilly.

Upon returning to Syracuse, I entered a final post on the blog to wrap things up.

October 8, 2012

Full circle

On our crew's drive back to Syracuse from Washington, D.C., I had a sudden epiphany.

I turned around and shared my realization with my friend Jack, who had joined me for the initial drive from Syracuse to Greenville, South Carolina.

"You drove with me to my first event for this project," I said. "And now you're driving back with me from my last."

Jack's eyes lit up, and he uttered the only response that could possibly be appropriate at that point.

"Wow."

Five months after I started my journey through the enigma known as minor-league golf, it has come to the end. I've been to Kansas, Missouri, Indiana, South Carolina and Washington, D.C. I've interviewed countless players, watched thousands of holes of golf played, and added plenty of miles to various cars. I've slept in my car, gone to events on no sleep, eaten too many dollar-menu chicken sandwiches, and listened to too many top-40 radio songs.

I'm all the better for it, I think. Either way, I rolled back into Syracuse last night with Jack (among others) in the car. Just as I left Syracuse for Greenville with Jack in the car, five months ago.

Before this project started, I had an unclear vision. I knew I wanted to gain a sense of what life in the minors really is, but I wasn't sure how to go about it. My plan was to watch as much golf as I could, talk to as many players as I could and replicate their travel experiences as much as I could.

Along the way, I gained varied insights into different areas of the Web.com Tour life, with the graciousness and generosity of the players and media officials who

gave me their time and support. I got to know players, befriended players - and in the pinnacle of my journalistic (and right up there in my personal) life, caddied for Kevin Johnson in Springfield.

So what did I ultimately learn? To put it concisely, I still don't really know. I now feel that to truly put together a great project on life in Triple-A golf, I need more time. I need to talk to players over the course of a few years, and to attend tournaments over that span as well. Right now, I have a snapshot of the Tour, which is perfectly fine for a good project.

To make it great may take some time.

But I'm here, with my first year of the experience complete, and I'm still alive. I did it, somehow. Who knows how.

I do know that these players are good, that the line between the big-boy tour and these guys is incredibly fine. A couple putts here, an untimely hook there.

I know these guys don't live rich. Renting cars to drive from place to place, staying in budget motels, sometimes traveling together. It's a traveling fraternity. Many of them could do better financially if they went into other lines of work.

But they love what they do, and that's good enough.

And I know these guys are normal people. They don't have egos. They aren't famous enough to have egos. They happen to play a game for a living where you can track their results on a website - and besides that, they're just like you and me.

Just the fact that I was allowed to caddy should say plenty about that.

So here I am, back in Syracuse, ready to jump into the heart of my senior year of college. Where does time go?

It doesn't seem that much long ago that I was sitting on my old porch at 501 Clarendon St., planning the South Carolina trip with Jack. The trip was his idea, which led to my project becoming a reality in Greenville, which led to plenty of summer memories in far-flung places like Wichita and Springfield.

Which led to Jack returning with me from Washington, completing the circle. Jack didn't come home with me from Greenville (he took a plane back to Cleveland for his birthday) and he didn't come with me to Washington (he had an interview on Friday morning, and he caught a bus to D.C. to meet up).

But the trip definitively began with Jack, and it ended with him. Completely unplanned, but absolutely no surprise regardless.

The root of the entire golf adventure took hold during my study abroad in London, when I began to understand the value and importance of spontaneity, not being afraid to do things that you want to do. Sounds easy, but it seems to me like a trait that needs to be learned.

I learned it abroad, while traveling with Jack and the gang through places I had never expected to actually see - places like the Vatican, the Eiffel Tower, the

Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Amsterdam Red Light District, and so on. I could go on for days.

So it's fitting, then, that one of my London roommates - Jack - helped to begin and end my golf sojourn. Without my willingness to take a risk and try to get access to a professional golf tour, the experience would never have happened. I would never have fulfilled a personal bucket list item of caddying in professional golf, or a professional dream of interviewing dozens of pro golfers.

Be bold. Be brave. Take risks.

Don't fear failure. Fear the possibility of never having the opportunity to fail.

Generic statements, but truths that served me well in my adventure. Thanks to everyone who played a part in making it happen.

As my favorite musical artist Dave Matthews would say, "And here, we will rest in peace."

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Summary of Capstone Project

My project serves as an exploration of life in minor league golf, particularly the Web.com Tour, which is the Triple-A level of professional golf. In order to conduct research for my project, I hit the road for a few weeks during summer 2012 and traveled to Tour events in far-flung places such as Springfield, Missouri; Greenville, South Carolina; Evansville, Indiana and Wichita, Kansas. While at the events, I watched plenty of tournament golf and interviewed dozens of players on topics ranging from Tour life, to the differences between the PGA Tour and the minors, to caddies. Along the way, I kept a running blog of my research and experience (found at goveandthegang.blogspot.com), where I mixed event coverage and stories with narration about my life on the road. I still update the blog from time to time while at school, and will continue to do so while I work to turn my project into (hopefully) an eventual book.

For the written portion of my project, I looked over my blog to find a wide variety of interesting stories that could combine to provide a cohesive picture of life on the Web.com Tour. I assembled a selection of these stories – from event coverage stories, to player profiles, to parts of a series on my week spent as a caddy – and put them together as a narrative that allows the reader to get a full sense of my experiences without going through the blog and reading every single post. I also added an introductory section that gives the reader a sense of my rationale for the project.

My research method for the project took the form of aggressive tournament coverage and focused heavily on personal interviews. While at the events, I would spend full days at the course, getting there before the first players teed off and leaving after everyone had completed play for the day. I followed some groups for the whole round, and interviewed other players after they completed the final hole. I based my questions on prior knowledge of players acquired through preliminary research, as well as their current play and position in the week's event.

After completing a series of interviews, I would walk to the media center to update my blog. Aside from players, I also talked to various fans, along with some players' friends, families, and instructors. I was always on the lookout for potential stories, and stumbled across some good ones along the way. My crowning achievement was caddying for Tour veteran Kevin Johnson in Springfield, where I was offered a true behind-the-scenes perspective from a caddy's point of view. Johnson took a liking to me after we talked at multiple events, and he was very gracious to extend the offer.

I also got to caddy for former Ryder Cup player Brett Wetterich for a few holes at an event in Evansville. Two other players I spoke to frequently throughout the summer were veterans Omar Uresti and Jeff Gove. In addition, Jeff Adams, the Web.com Tour director of communications, was instrumental in helping me acquire media credentials for the events. Tour media liaison Joe Chemczyk was a big help as well, and tournament media officials at all events were receptive to my project.

The significance of my project is that no extensive research has ever been conducted regarding the lives of players in minor-league golf. Superstars like Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson are written about extensively, and national publications always make sure to devote complete attention to the PGA Tour and other large-scale events, so little to no attention is devoted to minor-league events as a result. As a golf lover and aspiring golf writer who finds incredible interest in the lifestyles of professional golfers, I have never been able to read much about minor-league golf, so I felt a desire to learn about it myself. If I can conduct more research over time and eventually get enough material to publish a quality book, I can make sure that other golf lovers like me can learn more about the Web.com Tour if they wish. As of now, the occasional story on PGATour.com is all a reader really gets, from a national standpoint on minor-league coverage. I will be working for Golf World magazine this summer after graduation, and I am excited to bring my new comprehensive knowledge of the minor-league circuit to the office, where I feel that not many people will have it due to the magazine's PGA Tour-driven focus on content.

All in all, the project allowed me to fulfill a lifelong dream of getting to know professional golfers. Ever since I was a little kid, I have always watched events on television and followed them online, and I was always intrigued by the ups and downs of life on the Tour – the endless travel, the dramatic shifts in quality of play from week to week, the amount of time spent practicing alone, and so on. I always had plenty of questions that I wished I could ask the players, so having the chance to actually do so was surreal. Along with covering the events themselves, I

enjoyed the traveling. I had never been anywhere west of Ohio, much less Kansas or Missouri, and the journeys were fulfilling and rewarding despite the 40-hour round-trip drives.

Looking back on the experience, it is almost hard for me to believe that it actually happened. The project confirmed my belief that being a golf writer is my ultimate career goal, and it was an honor and privilege for me to complete my undergraduate Capstone project in such an exciting and enjoyable way.