



Last Word by Jimmy Roberts of NBC Sports

Playing Lesson

“Tiger unleashed an enormous smile as he showed me his new golf cart, which had a sound system worthy of my living room.”

For some reason, people seem to think because I talk about golf on TV, I must be acutely skilled.

I am. At talking.

I actually had one guy ask me (obviously before we teed off) if I'd ever played the Tour. This can be a particularly perilous situation when playing with real pros and constitutes the primary reason I normally don't: Better to preserve the illusion that I know what I'm doing, rather than make it apparent I do not.

But occasionally, risking my credibility seems like a small gamble given the experience. That's how I felt a few years back when, during a trip to central Florida to cover a figure skating event on ABC, Mark O'Meara invited me over to Isleworth to see his new house. When I got there, his housekeeper told me that he was at the clubhouse. I walked into the grill-room and there he sat, just about to finish lunch with Tiger Woods.

“C'mon”, he said, “we're teeing off in 10 minutes. I hope you brought your clubs.” (Of course, I had).

I'm not the type of golfer who particularly likes to have people watch him play. I guess I like to suffer in solitude. It didn't make me feel any better to follow a couple of major championship winners on the tee (was there some type of USGA limit on the number of strokes they could give me?)

I gathered my wits, stepped up to the tee box and, just as I was about to swing, I heard a cart come to a screeching stop on the macadam 15 feet away.

“Oh, this ought to be entertaining!” It was Lee Janzen, another of Isleworth's accomplished residents.

I'm happy to say I didn't shank the ball; it ended up in a fairway bunker, from where I made a (very respectable) bogey. We only played nine holes, but it couldn't have been more fun. Both Woods and O'Meara were beyond gracious and made me feel totally comfortable. A lot I've forgotten, two things I have not: The enormous smile Tiger unleashed as he showed me his new golf cart, which had a

sound system worthy of my living room. I also remember how he casually out-drove me by about 100 yards on a par five.

While that unscripted afternoon on the golf course was pure enjoyment, sometimes playing golf with a person of note is something you “have” to do in the interests of a work-related assignment.

Because so many of our country's presidents had played there, when the U.S. Open came to Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Maryland in 1997, I decided to do a story on the history of Presidential golf. Through a contact, I reached out to George H.W. Bush for an interview. The Bush family has numerous Met Area ties: His father was a U.S. Senator from Connecticut, and both his grandfather and great-grandfather had been presidents of the USGA. The Walker Cup was named after the latter. To my surprise, he not only welcomed me up to Maine for an interview, but suggested we play golf together.

What a day... my favorite part of which was him telling me the most significant difference between being President and former President.

“When you're in office,” he said, “nobody ever asks you to putt out anything under five feet. They say: ‘oh that's good sir, pick it up, you don't need to putt that.’ But the minute you're out of office, it's more like: ‘what are you kidding me? I'm not giving you that! We've still got a match on the line.’ ”

With a good-natured sense of self deprecation, he referred to himself throughout the round as “Mr. Smooth” as he did play-by-play on his lamentably imprecise short game. He insisted we play a simple match, and now the dollar I took from him that day, along with a note he later sent me and the scorecard he attested bearing evidence of my 83, sits framed in my office. It's one of the few sports mementos I've bothered to save over the years.

As I said, I generally like to avoid playing golf with famous people, especially if they know who I am. Looking back though, I'm glad that every now and then, I've gone against my instinct. ■