

inside SocialGolf

Editor: Rod Morri
rod@insidesocialgolf.com.au
P: (02) 4377 1337

Senior Writer: Rob Willis
ed@insidesocialgolf.com.au

Contributing Editors: Bill Colhoun, Daniel Murphy, Glenn Whittle, Michael Mosher, Mat Howe, Kristy Murphy, David Granville and Greg Dowling
ed@insidesocialgolf.com.au

Graphic Design: Lucinda Shelley
acrobat1@bigpond.net.au

QLD Sales Manager
Diane Goodchild
D & A Media Pty Ltd
P: (07) 3886 8560 F: (07) 3886 8564
M: 04 17 052 474
diane.damedia@bigpond.com

National/NSW/ACT Sales Manager
Sam Arthur
P: (02) 9527 6691 F: (02) 9527 6691
M: 0410 575 303
sam@insidesocialgolf.com.au

VIC/TAS Sales Manager
Grant Manson
Ph: 03 9530 9990
gmanson@cdmedia.net.au

Publisher:
Outdoor Sports Publishing Pty Ltd
Director: Sam Arthur
PO BOX 1050
Cronulla NSW 2230
P: (02) 9527 6691 F: (02) 9527 6691
sam@outdoorsportspublishing.com.au

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Rob Willis
Teeing Off
regular contributor

Howell good is he?

While tending to my responsibilities as media manager at the Sharks NRL club, typing the odd article for PGA magazine or putting forth my opinions on the pages of Inside Social Golf, sometimes I let the mind wander and think about what might have been. I was a fair player during my time as a golf pro, managed to stay exempt on the Australasian Tour for 10 years in a row, won a tournament in Asia and made a reasonable living. For my troubles I've also got an ugly-looking Fijian Open trophy hanging on the wall at home.

But every now and then there are the 'what if's', 'coulda's' and 'shoulda's' which wash over you. As content as you may be in whatever it is you have moved onto, such thoughts are unavoidable.

What if I'd played better that day, if only I could have made that putt and I should have hit that shot just that little bit differently?

I especially get those feelings when I see David Howell collecting another enormous pay cheque, winning a title in Europe, challenging for major championships or playing in the Ryder Cup. I got them again recently when he led in the US Open during day one at Winged Foot.

Howell, who recently moved into the top 10 on the official world rankings list, won the 1998 Australian PGA Championship at the NSW Golf Club. He went into the final round with a big lead, five or six shots from memory, with yours truly his playing partner on the last day.

While the last group on Sunday is exactly where a touring pro wants to be, it is a nerve wracking experience

and even more so when playing in your home town and in front of family and friends. Plenty of players better than I ever was have crumbled under the pressure of being in contention in an important event.

They say the more you experience the suffocating pressure of the situation, the better you get, and they are probably right. But only the best in the world get themselves in a position to win on a regular basis.

Coming into that tournament Howell was considered a player of potential, but he hadn't won anything of significance. So he, like myself, would have been feeling the heat, literally and figuratively, on a cloudless summer's Sunday in Sydney. He would have been dreaming, as I was, about what a victory in the Australian PGA would bring.

I remember Howell as a confident, yet quietly spoken Englishman, who hit the ball a good distance and had a silky smooth putting stroke. He started the final round well, extended his lead on the early holes and while I struck the ball reasonably, as nervous as I was I could hardly hold the putter, let alone hit a decent putt with it.

It was a day which was as tough as it was exciting and I managed to hang on as hard as I could to finish fifth. Howell cruised to a comfortable win. And from there it's history. The fifth placegetter from that day is now a journalist and a media manager,

the other a multi-millionaire golf professional, boasting a world ranking



David Howell has gone on to bigger and better things since winning the Australian PGA

which has him recognized as one of the top-10 players in the world. Could I see top-10 player written all over him? Multiple tournament winner? A leader of the European order of merit? A contender at a US Open? No, and yes. He had all the attributes, although his swing to the casual observer was far from text book. Up and down the practice range on any given week, you would see many that were prettier.

Which begs the question: What makes a champion golfer? What separates the Rob Willis's of the world, from the David Howell's? The short answer is, very little.

It can be about getting a break at the right time, keeping your nerve when everybody else around you is falling apart, having the intestinal fortitude to hole a six-foot putt that really matters, or by getting a whole lot of luck just when you need it. Really though, it isn't very much.

Keen golf followers would have visited the practice area at professional tournaments and found it tough to separate the leading players from the tour strugglers.

They all strike the ball somewhat the same, stroke the putter in a similar fashion and most work as hard at their game as the next person. But some rise to the top, while others never quite 'make it'. I played college golf in the US during the mid 1980's alongside a whole host of wonderful players, Billy Mayfair, Duffy Waldorf, Kirk Triplett, Scott Verplank and fellow Aussie Steve Elkington among them. They all turned out to be pretty good players.

But back then they struggled to beat a guy named Sam Randolph. He won everything there was on offer in college golf, was a US amateur champion and had the golfing world at his feet. Playing in his company was to be in awe of his ability. Then he turned pro and never made any impact.

Every now and then his name pops up at a US Nationwide Tour event, usually at the bottom of the list rather than at the top.

Another from the Philippines, Carito Villaroman, was an amazing player while I was in college. I saw him in Asia when I was competing up there and he had no game left and sadly had achieved

nothing as a professional.

On the other side of the scale, plenty have overachieved with the gifts they were born with. A lot of so-called good judges never thought I might achieve as much as I did in my ten years on tour.

Call it the x-factor, maybe its fate. It could be some work harder than others, have more self belief or get that break when they needed it most. Whatever it is, it smiles on some, but not on all.

Then there is David Howell. He looked good that day back in 1998, gave the impression that he had every chance of being a good player, but I'm not sure he looked THAT good. Top 10 in the world, major championship contender?

So does that leave me as a bitter and twisted Inside Social Golf columnist? Hardly. Hey, the Sharks are winning and everything is fine. What is does, however, is make my story better. When scanning the golf results and spotting Howell's name towards the top on a regular basis, I think about the week I matched shots with him and lost very little in comparison. Rather than being jealous of where he stands now in the world of golf, I cheer him on.



I've played with some of the greats in my time and while David Howell isn't one of them, he's definitely good

I'm a reasonably modest type, but after a beer or two I don't mind telling all those willing to listen, that for a missed putt there, a lucky bounce there, I could have taken Howell down at NSW Golf Club that day. Maybe it 'coulda', 'shoulda' been me who was challenging the game's very best. Golf can be funny like that.

Million Dollar Man!



ISG Exclusive
by Rod Morri

Cashing a winner's cheque for a cool one million US dollars might be the norm for Tiger Woods and co but not for former Brisbane professional Stuart Deane.

Which is why the Texas based 34-year-old hasn't stopped checking his bank account on the internet since the day back in May when he did exactly that - putted for, and won, US\$1 million at a mini tour event in the US.

But the hardest part wasn't the winning - it was keeping the whole thing a secret for 5 weeks until the event had aired on television.

This remarkable story began earlier this year when Deane, who has been a teaching professional for the last five years, decided to have a last shot at playing full time.

A friend had told him about a mini tour called the US Pro Golf Tour (America is littered with these) which was making a real name for itself among the players.

With no card to play any of the main tours, Deane decided to pay his entry fee and give it a go.

"I finished second in my first two events, which was great," he says now.

What was even better, though,

was a sponsorship deal the tour's organisers had just announced with multi-millionaire Donald Trump.

It was to be a 54 hole, made for TV special event with a starting field of 192. After three rounds, the top 10 would take part in a nine hole shootout with one player dropping out each hole. The last man standing would take home the \$1 million.

Deane was one of the last two. "At that stage the money really starts to play on your mind," Deane told Inside Social Golf.

"I knew the worst I could do was second and that was \$150,000 which is ok. But it's not \$1 million."

On the final hole Deane had an eight foot putt to win outright.

"My caddy and I read it perfectly (inside left lip, firm) and I reckon I hit the best putt I'd hit all week.

"But it didn't go in. In fact, it went all the way around the hole, disappeared under the lip and then popped back out. It did everything but go in. I couldn't believe it." So it was back to the tee for a playoff. This time, Marten hit it in some real trouble short of the green and had an impossible shot to save par. Deane had left himself

a nice chip which he had run up to a foot.

"And that was the toughest putt of the week. I stood over it and thought "How stupid will I look if I miss this?" Thankfully, I didn't"

Now came the hard part. All the players had signed a confidentiality agreement not to talk about the result until it aired on ESPN five weeks later.

"That was really hard," says Deane. "We got the cheque (it arrived by Fed Ex, if you can believe that) about three weeks after the tournament.

"So we still had two weeks before we could tell anyone. It was pretty crazy"

Deane himself is still a little overwhelmed by his achievement and what it will mean.

"I still log on to the web ever few hours, look at the bank balance and can't believe it," he says.

"And now with money in the bank I can pursue a place on the Tour without the pressure of having to make a living for my family while I do it."

And if he makes it to the US Tour, who knows how many more million dollar cheques might be coming his way.

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