

## **READ WHAT *GOLF WORLD* SAYS ABOUT THE DAKOTAS TOUR BELOW!!**

### **In the Middle of Nowhere** ([From Golf World September 2, 2005](#))

No one venturing through South Dakota this summer would have considered Walter Keating's golf swing a tourist attraction, at least not in the same league with Mount Rushmore or certainly Reptile Gardens. When the longest hitter on the Dakotas Tour pulled his driver out of the bag, though, it was worth a peek if you were in the neighborhood. Keating, 29, stands 6-feet-7 and weighs 255 pounds. He is bald, left-handed and imparts some serious hurt on the ball, the fury of his technique connoting the name of his Canadian hometown, Thunder Bay.

It is common to lament what professional golf lacks in these bloated-purse and buffed-golfer days--characters, camaraderie and charm, for starters--but critics may just be looking in the wrong place. "Real golf isn't what you see on TV," says Tom Silva, another regular on the 16-event 2005 Dakotas Tour. "This is golf."

Silva, Keating and a dozen other golfers are at an upstairs table at the Waterfront Gourmet Grill, a restaurant in downtown Yankton, S.D., once the territorial capital of the Dakotas and, this week in early August, home of the Hillcrest Invitational Pro-Am. The 72-hole tournament, whose \$75,000 purse and \$20,000 first prize are the richest on the circuit, begins the next morning. In lieu of a routine practice round, the American guys have just defeated an International team in the Cockatoo Cup and now it is time to celebrate and commiserate.

The competition was titled after the adult club of the same name in Yankton, which can safely be presumed isn't where the city's most famous son, Tom Brokaw, went for milkshakes after high school in 1957. There are plenty of beers and back-slaps, and by the time a second bottle of Rumpel Minze 100-proof peppermint schnapps has been depleted, shot by enthusiastic shot, everyone's glass is half-full even if it's empty. The big boys getting tucked in to play for big money over at the International near Denver can't be having more fun than this, can they?

Golfers don't come to the Dakotas Tour to get rich. They come to learn shots and strategies, to both forget and remember. "I'm not making any money, but I'm living a dream," says Amos Rolon, a 52-year-old from Arizona, in his seventh year in the Dakotas. Rolon sells recreational vehicles most of the year and travels in one along the tour with his girlfriend, Cindy Krueger, two Rotweilers and a 13-year-old African gray parrot called Kirby. "He says 'Fore,' " Rolon says, "and I'm trying to teach him to say, 'Pick it up, that's good.' "

Along the way the Dakotas golfers meet a lot of nice people. A few years ago Rolon was driving through Belle Fourche, a town north of Rapid City, when he hit a deer, mangling the front of his truck. "It's Sunday morning," Rolon says. "Not only does this man open his shop and fix it right then, he only charged me \$125 for three hours' worth of work. That doesn't happen in Phoenix. America's still there, you just have to get off the road and find it."

A man chalks up plenty of miles behind the wheel- 1,992 this season, from the first event in Spencer, Iowa, to the last, in Fargo, N.D., not including beer runs. "Only had

one day off in three weeks," says Chad Fribley, a 29-year-old Oregonian who supports his competitive career working bag rooms in Palm Springs during the winter. "You're either playing or you're driving." Joe Ogilvie, a PGA Tour player who launched his pro career in the Dakotas in 1996 after graduating from Duke, found out quickly this tour wasn't like so many developmental tours that are tethered to one locale. "Somebody would give you directions, and they'd say, 'Take a left at the first light and then take your next right,'" Ogilvie recalls of his Dakotas experience. "You'd ask how far it was to the first light, and they'd say, 'About 90 miles.' "

A PROVING GROUND for some and a fantasy camp for others, the Dakotas Tour is a loosely woven tapestry of tournaments from 18 to 72 holes. Nearly every one is a pro-am, making them more social occasions than many minor tours where it is just a man, his cart and his consternation about being able to win back his entry fee. "You have to be polite even if you're cranky," Keating says of the amateurs' presence, and he isn't shy about reminding any newcomer who forgets where he is. Among the 180 amateurs at Hillcrest was 49-year-old Pat McFate, who made the 430-mile drive from Muscatine, Iowa, with a handful of his friends. McFate has been playing at Hillcrest G&CC's gathering for 22 years. When his sons got old enough, they started playing, too. McFate considers the \$250 amateur entry fee a bargain for three days of golf (four, if you make the cut) and all the trimmings, and he figures his share of a modest motel on Tom Brokaw Boulevard is about \$12 a night.

The director of the Dakotas Tour is 79-year-old Bill Branson, who spends his mornings working behind the counter at the Hillcrest pro shop and is still spry enough to shoot his age. A Nebraska native, Branson settled in Yankton after moving there to play semipro baseball in the early 1950s, and ran a bowling alley on the edge of town for 20 years. He has been a clearinghouse for the tour since the late 1990s, but each event--the seven 54- or 72-hole tournaments are called "majors"--is run locally.

Entry fees (ranging from \$125 for a one-dayer in Groton, S.D., to \$650 at Hillcrest) are a la carte; players can play in as many or as few tournaments as they want. Many golfers seek free lodging in local homes to keep down costs. "Private housing makes this tour," says Steve Hale, a 25-year-old from Michigan City, Ind., just beginning his pro career. "I didn't want to burn through a lot of money right away. I'm down [financially] for the year, but this tour teaches you how to deal with the travel and the different courses."

A dozen or so golfers play the entire tour ("Play for over \$413,625 in 51 days," a pamphlet boasts), a larger group plays most of the tournaments, and some cherry-pick the most lucrative stops: Yankton, Vermillion and Rapid City, S.D., plus Minot, N.D. Branson says, "I tell [the players] many times: We're awful glad to have you here. We hope you come back, but we're pulling for you to make it to the next level. We're just a starter level."

In contrast to the PGA Tour, post-round convention is more likely to include Coronas than a Cybex machine, but the Hillcrest practice range wasn't a ghost town. You could find a cancer survivor (Stuart Hendley, who conducted a pre-tournament clinic), a former commercial fisherman (James McCarthy, whose County Cork roots means that everyone calls him "Irish") and a high school math and science teacher (Jay Jurecic, who was preparing to return to the classroom in Caspian, Mich., after a two-year leave during which he played full time).

"It's a great tour for the money," says the 35-year-old Jurecic, pausing during a practice session by his small carry bag. "If you play all the events, it costs \$7,000 or \$8,000. It's fun playing with the ams, and you get to stay with families." Jurecic is one of the hard workers on the Dakotas Tour, the kind of fellow you'll see testing his golf grip on a water bottle and checking his takeaway in the locker-room mirror.

This was the 20th year for the Dakotas Tour, but a few of the events have been around much longer. Rapid City's tournament, the Arrowhead Pro-Am, has been contested since 1966. "We had 13 pros the first year, and the winner got \$750," says Arrowhead CC member John Derby, who organized the inaugural tournament and ran it for many years. Hillcrest's event, spearheaded by a local meat-packing owner named Laddie Cimpl, began in 1974. Cimpl's fellow Hillcrest members were quick to embrace the idea.

"We started out with red jackets [for the committee] then went to green," says Jim Cihak, who runs an insurance agency. "We thought we were as good as Augusta. Unfortunately, some of us have outgrown them."

Cihak is talking amid the spirited calcutta wagering at the Hillcrest clubhouse the night before the first round. There are green jackets sprinkled around the room as auctioneer Bill Bobzin offers up the 60 teams, his rapid-fire delivery barely slowing even as his voice protests from the strain. One member spends more than \$2,000 buying five groups, and \$26,000 is in the kitty by night's end. They'll wager another \$16,000 after the second round, and more on the nightly skills competitions. This might not be the big time, but in Yankton the Pro-Am is a big deal.

SILVA SAMPLED THE big time once. He played golf at San Jose State in his native northern California and got through Q school in 1989. But he wasn't able to play much or well as a PGA Tour rookie in 1990. He got only four starts in the first four months of the season, and like a kid at a carnival shooting gallery, the experience went too quickly. "It seemed like I was just getting my feet wet, and it was over," says Silva, who made one cut, at the B.C. Open, in 14 appearances.

He gave up his PGA Tour dreams for most of the 1990s, but by 1998 was ready to try again. After earning more than \$100,000 playing mini-tours that year, he advanced to Q school finals at La Quinta, Calif. With only nine of the 108 holes remaining, Silva was within the cut line and poised to succeed. Then he triple-bogeyed the 10th hole and failed by one stroke. Something inside died that day, and he teaches in the California desert now and has played in the Dakotas the last few summers, a little for the past, a little for the future, but mostly for fun.

"Five years ago I had about \$500 to my name and won a tournament in Minot," says Silva. He was in a small motor home then and used part of his winnings to buy a yellow labrador named Simon, who was keeping him company at his RV in Yankton, where he parked with Rolon and Keating in back of the Fox Run municipal course.

Silva's work has resulted in a deep, bronze tan, the kind people used to seek years ago when they lathered on Coppertone oils with no fear of the sun. Now 42, he plays in sneakers because they make his fickle back feel better. Stretching before his first swing of the tournament, Silva looks stiff but swings smoothly, his taut action delivering a perfect drive down Hillcrest's 10th fairway. Ignore the tennis shoes and you can imagine Silva on the PGA Tour, but he has a mediocre week, making the 54-hole cut but closing with a 77 to finish T-29 and earning only \$712.50.

That was \$712.50 more than Randy Jewell pocketed, because after shooting a 74 in qualifying, he didn't make the field. But Jewell, a chatty and athletic 40-year-old from West Portsmouth, Ohio, whose magic tricks are as good as his golf, was thankful to be playing at all. Six years ago a bone-crushing car accident had doctors convinced his golf days were over, and he is still waiting to have more reconstructive surgery to fix what the steering wheel did to his mouth.

Jewell hits the ball a long way--second on the tour, he says, to Keating, though there is no ShotLink available for confirmation. Jewell's swing is softball-home-run-king hard, and like a power hitter trying to launch one over the left-field fence, he pulls his right foot back a couple of inches before he swings. Jewell has been an ironworker for two decades, and the risky business of helping birth tall buildings can make a five-footer seem tame.

He travels with a plastic album full of photos of a heaven and a hell. There is Jewell in his white Augusta National caddie coveralls, posing beside Butch Harmon. He spent the winter of 2003 looping at the home of the Masters, and its painterly green hues are a jarring contrast to Jewell's other pictures. The rest of his album is filled with shots snapped at Ground Zero in New York after Sept. 11, 2001. There is the telling epilogue of a smoky sky and a tangled heap of debris. Jewell was there for 16 days helping salvage the giant beams that formed the skeleton of the fallen skyscrapers, getting paid for eight hours a day but working 20. He had seen men die on the job, but he had never seen anything like that.

Jewell spent last fall and winter working on the construction of a hospital in Huntington, W.Va., and didn't play golf for nine months. Earlier this year on another job a boss saw Jewell taking a practice swing on high and suggested he return to chase his ground-level dreams. Jewell thought that was a good idea.

HILLCREST CAME TO life in the early 1950s. Branson was one of the members who dug in the dirt to help it get done on a shoestring, putting in few bunkers because it saved money. It was nine holes at first, later expanded to 18. Most of the greens are tiny, crowned jobs that resemble giant bottle caps. Or as described by Champions Tour player Jim Ahern, who grew up next to Hillcrest, started working on the greenkeeping staff when he was 12 and graduated from Yankton High School in 1967, "just like one of your knuckles."

Ahern also has vivid memories of the many fir trees lining the Hillcrest fairways. "When they built the second nine, there wasn't a tree out there," he says. "They told the members to support the club by buying a tree. The nursery in town gave the club a great deal on those trees. Well, they planted them like they were never going to grow."

Last year McCarthy hooked his tee shot on the second hole into a big, thick fir and had to climb it to identify his ball. "I lost a spike. It was 130-percent humidity. I was covered with sap," McCarthy recalls.

"He'd reach into his pocket for a tee and come out with six," says Silva, McCarthy's playing partner that day, laughing at the memory.

Ahern avoided being stymied by the trees proficiently enough to win twice (1977, 1982) at Hillcrest. So did South Dakotan Tom Byrum (1984), R.W. Eaks (1985), Wayne Player (1987) and Nick O'Hern (1998). Members can roll off a roster of golfers who competed

there on their way to the PGA Tour. "You never know when you play with a guy where he'll end up," says Denny Fokken, a local bank executive.

Tom Lehman, Woody Austin, Bob Tway, Jeff Sluman, Cameron Beckman and Brett Quigley have played at Hillcrest. Steve Jones, Rich Beem, Phil Blackmar, Bill Glasson and Dick Mast also spent time in the Dakotas, and the alumni provide a rooting interest for their former hosts. "A lot of the players go to Q school in the fall," says Branson. "Everybody's on the Internet following what's happening. That's become a major entertainment for our people."

Pass through the Dakotas, and a player learns lessons he can use the rest of his career. "It was nothing to go out and shoot 63," says Beckman, who played there from 1994-96. "The courses were OK but pretty short. It was a major putting contest. Going low is a mindset, and you had to go low every time out, so that gave me a mindset to build on."

Not that all local knowledge involves golf. The gnats can be pesky in Yankton, but residents have a solution: wearing vanilla extract like after-shave. "You smell like a cake," says Mike Rhorer, "but it works."

STUART HENDLEY IS already making the turn Sunday afternoon as the leaders are just getting their final rounds underway, and it isn't going well.

"You want to play this nine for me?" Hendley asks an onlooker.

"You wouldn't want my score."

"I don't want my score," says Hendley, who competes sparingly and stays busy giving corporate exhibitions and outings. He'll have a nine-hour drive north to Winnipeg, then catch a flight home to Alberta. Driving most of the way saved him \$900. South of the G-5 and NetJets set, budgets matter. "If it's free, I'm there," Casey Devoll said the previous evening as he waited for the complimentary prime rib supper to commence.

Hendley wasn't going to be a factor Sunday, and his score wasn't going to make much of a monetary difference for him. The same can't be said of the 54-hole pacesetter, Ryan Vermeer, who led Andre Metzger by five and Robert Kalinowski by six. Vermeer, a 27-year-old Omaha native whose parents, Bob and Laura, drove in to watch him try to win his first pro tournament of any distinction, was hard to miss in a bright yellow shirt.

"That's a new shirt," says his mother when asked if it was her son's attempt at some Lance Armstrong yellow-jersey good luck. "He put that on my credit card. That reminds me, I've got to get my card back."

Among the other chasers was the 2005 leading money winner, Gary Christian, a 34-year-old Englishman who has lived in Alabama since getting out of Auburn. He has gotten to the second stage of Q school "four or five" times but supports his family by competing in golf's minor leagues. "If you can make a profit every year playing the mini-tours," he says, "it shows you can play."

Christian couldn't mount a charge Sunday in the final round, leaving Vermeer to duel it out with Kalinowski. After Vermeer bogeyed the 13th hole, the lead was gone and the

two were deadlocked at 18 under. Vermeer vented by throwing his cap at his cart with the velocity of some Roger Clemens heat.

"Look at Sergio Garcia and Tiger Woods," Vermeer explained later. "They play with a lot of positive emotion, but they also show negative emotion. If you don't get it off your chest, it's going to fester."

Who knows how Vermeer would have reacted had Kalinowski continued to apply the pressure, because at the 14th hole Kalinowski airmailed the green out of the rough and made a double bogey. "I thought it was my game," Kalinowski says afterward. "I was hitting quality shots, and I could see he was nervous. It was my advantage, and I hit a dumb shot."

The Vermeers had a pleasant Sunday drive the rest of the way. Like almost everyone else watching the final threesome, they were in a cart. By the back nine there were dozens of carts trailing the action, and they lined up in the peripheral shade of the greens like people in their sedans at a drive-in movie. It looked different, particularly when they wheeled in a big pack up the 17th hole, but the spectators were practically Masters-patron quiet when the shots were being hit.

By the time everyone had parked for the day, Vermeer was the man getting the \$20,000 winner's check, while Eric Bailey, a University of Wyoming golfer, received a green jacket, a \$500 merchandise certificate and a round of handshakes for claiming the amateur division. Vermeer's payday was twice as large as his biggest previous check, which he earned on the Tight Lies tour, where he has been a regular. As he choked up at the prize-giving, it was clear the distinction meant more than the dollars.

"It's been a long time coming," said Vermeer. "I would venture to say I've wanted to play the PGA Tour since I was 6 or 7."

The victory might finance a nicer honeymoon--he is getting married Sept. 17--and give him more confidence come Q school. For the moment, the feeling of being king for a day made him in no rush to exit with his oversized cardboard check, which wasn't quite as large as the ones the golfers get on TV but which nonetheless was going to look quite handsome on his wall.

There being no direct deposit, many of the players waited around for their checks to be written. Kalinowski hung out in the Hillcrest pro shop with Chris Galeski and Mike Troyer, who were going to make the 366-mile drive from Yankton to Rapid City together in Galeski's Ford Explorer. The players milled around the shop and shot the breeze with Hillcrest pro Pat Kramer. Kalinowski was due the runner-up's share of \$8,000. Small problem: the "eight" said "eighty." Blotting out the "y" wasn't satisfactory, so Kalinowski waited for someone to produce a mulligan. When he got it, it was time for a quick pizza dinner before setting out.

"If you don't like to travel, you won't like this gig," says Galeski, a 25-year-old Californian with an uncanny resemblance to Scott Verplank, circa 1986. Galeski had put more than 3,000 miles on his car since leaving home bound for the Great Plains.

The threesome made good time traveling west that night, because on the open roads of the Dakotas, one doesn't tend to dally. But Amos Rolon, his girlfriend, his dogs and his

bird weren't going to Rapid City. He was believed to be headed in the opposite direction, perhaps toward a butcher in Spirit Lake, Iowa, to buy some more of the best pork chops he had ever eaten.

Bill Fields