

The Am I Am

Playing in a pro-am before a golf tournament offers an inspiring look at professional athletes



BOB LATHAM

What would you think if you were an NFL quarterback playing on the road, trying to get the feel of an unfamiliar stadium, and in one of your first workouts you are required to throw balls to . . . a guy who plays in a flag football league, works at a desk all day and paid for the privilege of catching passes from you? This may explain why there is no pro-am in the NFL. Golf, though, is a sport that

sets up well for pro-am play, since players of vastly different ability can play the same course at the same time (albeit one at a far slower rate). Thus, pro golfers are subjected to the above-described indignity multiple weeks of the year.

I have often wondered if golfers view this as part of the responsibilities of their profession or whether it is complete anathema to them (a third option, actually enjoying it, I did not believe was in the realm of possibility). I have spoken to a number of amateur golfers who did have the thrill of playing in a pro-am associated with the PGA Tour and learned that there are basically three types of pros in a pro-am: those who put their head down, go about their business and ignore the amateur; those who engage in casual banter; and those who do a superb job of engagement. The late Arnold Palmer reportedly was a man who could make any pro-am partner feel as if he'd had a special experience. Olympic bronze medalist Matt Kuchar currently enjoys such a reputation.

I was not really a candidate to satisfy my own curiosity about playing a PGA pro-am—the dangers I would have presented to the gallery might have been disqualifying. But an opportunity arose recently that would give me a taste of the pro-am experience. I was invited to play in the Murphy USA El Dorado Shootout, at Mystic Creek Golf Club in Arkansas, on the Symetra Tour, a feeder tour for the LPGA. I had three goals for the day: 1. make sure my tee shot on the first hole actually went into the air; 2. have one of my shots used by our team of one pro and two other amateurs in the scramble format; and 3. don't hurt anybody. The pro with whom I was paired was Lauren Kim, a recent Stanford graduate who led the school to the NCAA golf title in 2015 and who was playing in the event on a sponsor's exemption. It would be her first pro-am as well, and she had as many questions as to the protocol of these things as I did. Our round together was only the second time she played the course after a practice round the day before. One way to learn all about a golf course is to

play with me, because you will see every aspect of it—woods, water, sand, neighboring residential yards.

Our names were announced and Lauren started us off on the first hole with an elegant drive that set up well for a 150-yard approach shot. My tee shot actually did go into the air, albeit reminiscent of a pop fly to left-center field. Predictably, we used the position of Lauren's ball for our second shot. I then hit an approach shot about four feet from the hole, to the astonishment of my three playing partners and a gallery of squirrels and gophers watching the green. My first two goals had been achieved in two shots, though it would be the last time my shot would be used all day. I could then just concentrate on avoiding damage to person or property.

On the first three holes, we had Lauren take the first putt, and she drained them all for birdies. On the next three holes, facing longer putts, we thought it would be better to have the three of us putt first so that Lauren could read our putts and

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knock it in if any of us failed to. We went 0 for 9. Unfortunately, following our miscues, Lauren did not make the birdie putts either. The damage to our scorecard also made us more sensitive to the needs of our pro. We suggested to her that it would simulate tournament playing conditions better if she putted first. And the rest of the day could not have been more enjoyable, nor could we have drawn a more engaging pro to play with. It was impressive to see such composure from someone at the beginning of her pro career. Her shots were unerringly straight. In the real tournament, she made the cut and then shot the low round of the day on Sunday (-5) to finish 18th in her first Symetra Tour event. Her -5 on Sunday was matched by Sherman Santiwawatthana-phong, who warmed up next to me on the practice tee and who went on to finish in the top 10 of the Symetra Tour standings, thereby earning her LPGA tour card. As they were the only two pros who saw my golf game, there must be something about watching my miserable example that breeds confidence in a pro golfer. Jordan, Rory, I await your call. ■

Bob Latham is a partner at the law firm Jackson Walker, L.L.P., and a World Rugby board member. A compilation of his best columns titled "Winners & Losers: Rants, Riffs and Reflections on the World of Sports," is available in the Media Zone at SportsTravelMagazine.com.