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## General Golf

### Georgia On My Mind: A Journey to Augusta National

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Most people have their own private Everest to climb. For some it may be catching a Marlin, others to visit Sienna and see the Palio and for some it may even be to summit the Mountain itself, for me, it was Augusta National, the home of the US Masters.

As a golf fan growing up in Australia, early April normally meant early to bed and early to rise to watch the Masters on TV. Like most, I lived and died with every shot Greg Norman hit, I dreamt about being out there playing on this patch of heaven but, like a lot of others, a distinct lack of ability was always going to stand in the way of my dreams. I was always destined to be a spectator, wrapped in my blanket and watching from the couch just wishing that one day I could be there.

Well, this year my dream came true and even writing this now, I can't believe that it did. Late last year I was listening to SEN 1116, a sports radio station in Melbourne, when I heard about a trip to The Masters being put together by Weribee Park Golf Pro David Wren and fellow Golf Pro Steve Khatib. Surprisingly the cost of the package wasn't nearly as much as I thought so I paid a deposit too big to enable me to back out and the next thing I knew, I was saving to go.

The months leading up to my departure were being ticked off the calendar and were made extremely enjoyable by the look on other golf fans faces when they found out where I was going. This look was normally followed by the sentence "You're joking right?". Then came a roll of the eyes and a long stream of expletives telling me in no uncertain terms how lucky I was and how jealous they were. This was almost as much fun as the non-golfer, who wondered why you would travel to the other side of the planet just to play golf and then the incredulous look when you corrected them and said you were just going to watch - that was almost worth the price of admission alone.

After three planes and 22 hours travelling we arrived in Augusta and were greeted with sunny skies and after a day or so settling in, we were off to Wednesday's practice round and the annual Par 3 Tournament. Augusta is a bigger place than I had imagined but the area outside the course belies the beauty of what waits within the bamboo hedge protected exterior.

The road was lined with people hoping to buy tickets, up to \$300 or more, and this was just the practice round! Our first taste of southern hospitality was when we parked our car for a 10-minute walk to the course. All the locals open their front yards up for car parking, selling cold drinks, umbrellas, ticket holders, ponchos, cookies and a myriad of other goodies, it's almost like a one street trash and treasure market but we happened to stop at the king of the crop.

"Y'all kin perk yer car here fer 5 bucks!" came the call in a deep Southern accent, so we pulled over and there was one of the friendliest guys you could ever meet. He told us how and where we should go and invited us back to "perk" in his shop front every day. Although this guy seemed a putt short of a par round, the trip most definitely wouldn't have been the same had we not met him.

We walked up past Magnolia lane where a little understated sign let me know I was at Augusta National Golf Club, nothing ostentatious about this place, just a quiet assumed elegance. Lining up to get in took only minutes despite the number of people. There was no pushing, no shoving; god forbid anyone would put a foot out of line here. The attendants gave precise, polite instructions as to what you could or couldn't bring into the course and, naturally, everyone complied.

Once inside the course the first stop for many was the gift shop. Here you could



choose from a myriad of souvenirs, almost anything and everything you could think of was there for sale and all of it was very reasonably priced, actually, I thought it was cheap.

From here it's a short walk to the course and onto the first fairway, right alongside the main scoreboard. The scene that greets you is beyond what you could ever imagine just watching it on TV. I actually had to bend over and touch the grass to find out if it was real. I'm not exaggerating when I say it looks like astroturf, it is simply perfect. The next shock is the undulation - the first fairway rises up away to your right, and when I say up, I mean it. Pristine white sandy bunker on the right, perfectly pruned Pine trees on your left, this is when I took a deep breath and tried to let it all soak in. It was a surreal feeling to think I was standing on the first fairway at Augusta National Golf Club.

The practice round was great fun, watching the players hitting chips and putts from all angles. I stood next to the 7th green and tried to catch a glimpse of Tiger as he approached, two minutes later he walked straight over to where I was standing and dropped 4 or 5 balls and hit chips a metre away from me. It may not sound like much but standing a metre away from the great man at Augusta gave me a thrill I won't forget for a while.

Not long after that I bumped into Golf Australia's own Gary Edwin down at Amen Corner and had a little chat about Rod Pampling and his chances, then I managed to meet David Leadbetter and he also stopped for a photo and a five minute chat.

Most of the first day was spent just roaming around the course, putting names to faces as I came across the holes I had always seen on the small screen but never in real life.

I went over to the 16th hole where, after the players hit their tee shots, the people in the stands would all chant 'Skip, Skip, Skip' and each player would take a ball or 2 and walk to the edge of the pond and try to skip the ball over the water onto the green. The hole had been cut at the front right, which meant any ball that got over the pond had half a chance of going close, which fired the crowd up even more.

Frenchman Thomas Levet was the crowd favourite for the day on this hole as he initially shunned the crowd with a bit of ham acting, pretending he had no intention of joining in the fun before then sneaking up on Angel Cabrera's caddy whilst hushing the crowd and almost throwing him in the pond. After two unsuccessful attempts at skipping the ball across the pond, each unsuccessful attempt followed by more fake histrionics including almost throwing his club in the drink, he popped another ball out of his bag and floated a gentle lob wedge into the crowd, which of course, had the patrons cheering wildly.

Next stop was the practice range where we watched a fatter and happier David Duval stripe everything he stood behind and Gary Edwin give Ian Baker-Finch an impromptu lesson. Then it was on to the Par 3 tournament, which is played on a beautiful tract of land adjacent to the main course. Nine par 3 holes surround "Ike's Pond", which is brimming with metre long catfish and turtles and is a real party atmosphere. Players ham it up and sign autographs for the fans, the kids, wives, girlfriends and grandkids caddy for the players and every shot played is aimed right down the pipe.

We followed Rod Pampling for the first couple of holes where he hit the pin on number 1 and almost rolled it in on number 2 prompting eventual winner Ben Crane to yell, "You're all over the pins baby!". At the end of the round, passionate St Kilda supporter Geoff Ogilvy was signing autographs for the kids and was about to leave when I yelled "Geoff, how about an autograph for the Sainter's fans??" Immediately he came over and signed our hats but asked "Are you guys really Sainter's or did you just say that to get me over here". My roommate Lex admitted he barracked for Melbourne and I owned up to being an Essendon Fan to which he replied (with a big grin) "So long as you don't follow Collingwood, it's OK I guess!".

Our next couple of days were spent playing golf at Forest Hills Golf Club on the Thursday and then at Palmetto Golf Club on the Friday, which was an experience in

itself. If you can put decadence and golf in the same sentence, it would spell Palmetto Golf Club.

Our next foray at the Masters wasn't until Saturday so we got there early but unfortunately the clouds were thick and rain swollen and it wasn't looking good. We were informed by our buddy that there was a tornado watch and rain coming and we were "gonna git wet". A line had formed outside the gates but a police man came over and informed us we all had to move, there was no lining up and we had to wait for further instructions. Once again, no one complained, no one argued, everyone just politely made their way back to their cars and waited for conformation that the gates would open.

A couple of hours later we once again lined up and entered the course. There was some play early in the day but the weather closed in and with lightning in the area, play was abandoned.

Just as we were about to give up hope late in the day they sent the players out. Despite the amount of water that had been dumped on the course, the greens were in magnificent condition due to the heaters that built under each of them drying them out and play was able to start immediately. The heaters were incredible, if you stood on the area adjacent to the 9th fairway, you could actually feel the ground rumble as the motors kicked into action and just a few discreetly placed vents around the course that billowed warm air out of the ground gave any indication that there was something out of the ordinary happening.

I spent most of the limited playing time sitting behind the 6th green, watching the players hit over spectators heads down a huge drop to the hole 162 metres away. A large group of Aussies had gathered and gave each Australian player a cheer as they left the green, each cheer acknowledge with a grin or a touch on the peak of their hat and each acknowledgement giving 20 or so Aussie spectators a little thrill that they will keep with them forever. Finally play was called off in diminishing light with both Ernie Els and Tim Clark with make-able birdie putts on the 6th.

Sunday came and was a glorious day and once inside the gates I headed straight for number 18 green with my Masters Chair. The Masters Chair is a small foldable beach chair which you can place in designated sitting areas around the entire course, the great thing about this is, you can put your chair in a spot, leave it there, go away to watch somewhere else and when you return 1, 2 or even 6 hours later, your chair will be sitting exactly where you left it. I managed to get mine in a prime spot on 18, just above the bunker on the right side of the green, almost pin high.

I watched most of the morning groups come through 18 finishing their 3rd round and when Mickelson hooked his 2nd shot into the gallery and they moved all the chairs to allow him to play his shot, I was standing right on his shoulder. Can you imagine standing alongside the 18th green at Augusta during The Masters as one of the world's best attempts a tricky little chip and run and you are the closest person to him - it was unreal. By the way, he duffed the chip - I was going suggest to him he putt from there but I guess he thought he knew what was best.

From there I went down to Amen Corner and sat in the stands in the glorious sunshine and watched approach shots into 11, tee shots into 12 over Rae's Creek and the tee shot on the par 5 13th and this is when it really hit home after 3 days as to where I was and what I was doing. At this point I was barracking for every player in the field, I wanted each shot I saw to be perfect so I could say I was there when "it" happened. I spent most of the rest of the day walking around the course, I saw Allenby nearly have a hole in one on 4 and Appleby almost repeat the effort a few groups later, I saw Olazabel nearly have an Albatross on 15 as he mounted his charge and then watched him bogey minutes later. It was an absolutely electric atmosphere that I wish I could describe to you better and will never forget.

When I got back to my seat, still exactly where I had left it, I watched the final seven groups come up the 18th and the only downside was that there was only realistically one chance late in the day and we weren't going to see a classic Masters finish.

Once play was finished and we had left the course, a kind of empty feeling came across me and I'm sure I wasn't the only one. One of our tour group Tony explained it as "...the kind of feeling you get when you first find out Santa isn't real, you can still enjoy Christmas but something's missing". However, after on reflection it really was just the disappointment of having to leave such a great place, a great tournament, friendly hosts and without doubt the greatest holiday of my life.

We formed a very eclectic group of golf fans ranging from bankers and financial advisors to printers and pizza shop owners and each of us thoroughly enjoyed each others company and many long lasting friendships have been born. A father and son, Dennis and Darren, made the trip together and when we sat around later that evening enjoying a beer and reflecting on our personal highlight of the experience, both men had a tear in their eye as they explained what it meant to experience their Masters dream and to do it together.

I would think that many reading this would think that they can't afford to take a trip like this and I know I thought exactly the same way, now I know I simply couldn't have afforded not to do it.

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