



Finding Grace in the Game

BY JIM DUCIBELLA



T After being at the forefront of military operations overseas, VSGA member Jim Gallagher is back home – and again pursuing his passion for golf

HIS STORY could showcase many things people would argue are more important than golf: the love between a father and son; a man's love for his country and his commitment to serve his nation, humbly and heroically; courage, determination, the indomitable will to live.

Someone could write forever about VSGA member Jim Gallagher and how these qualities and others, interwoven, have produced a truly unique human being. Hundreds of pages alone could be devoted to an exemplary military career, the missions he has been a part of, the near-death experiences, the citations and honors.

Yet, without golf, there could be no sense of the real man. It didn't take long for a caller to realize that it was impossible to profile someone as diversely extraordinary as

Gallagher. So, with his permission, we skirted some "real" issues and instead talked about the influence golf has exerted on his life.

IMPORTANT EARLY LESSONS

Born in Washington, D.C., his father co-owned a chain of successful dry cleaners in and out of the nation's capital.

"I learned to play when I could walk," Gallagher recalls.

The Washington Senators baseball team used Gallagher's to clean their uniforms, which led to some fantasy sports-type experiences. Young Gallagher once watched as his dad and Mickey Mantle played at Tantalum Country Club in Fort Washington, Md. Another time, he followed his father and Redskins quarterback Sonny Jurgensen.

"Our golf circle included a lot of famous people," he says. "Mickey was really long –

but really wrong. I had to look for a lot of golf balls."

"Having that kind of business, my dad worked a lot of long hours. Golf was a way to be with him, and we loved being out there together."

During the 1968 race riots in Washington, D.C., Gallagher's father abandoned his stores inside the District and came home to comfort his wife and family. Then he made a startling announcement.

"He said, 'Jim and I are going to play golf,'" Gallagher recalls. "He was worried, but he also said, 'We've hired people down there to work for us. We've treated them fairly and honestly. I believe they'll remember that.'"

"That situation taught me one of my early life lessons: treat everyone with respect, no matter their station in life. My family has

THIS PAGE: SCOTT K. BROWN; OPPOSITE: JIM GALLAGHER

always done that because it's the right thing to do."

Later, the Gallaghers purchased Prospect Hill Plantation in Louisa County, which they began rebuilding and renovating and which today is a bed and breakfast. Gallagher set up a couple of holes in a pasture and would "whack the ball around" when he didn't have hay to bale or corn to chop. He also spent considerable time at Keswick, often playing from morning to dark for just \$7.

Living in Vermont while his parents tackled another preservation project, Gallagher became one of the best young players in the Northeast, earning medalist honors in the state high school tournament twice, and finishing fourth in the Vermont State Amateur as a 17-year-old as well as placing fourth in the New England Amateur.

At college, Gallagher was twice Northeast Division III medalist and advanced to the individual portion of the NCAA championships, before a knee injury scuttled plans for a shot at the professional tour.

A TIME TO SERVE AND TRUST

Starting in 1981, the next 14 years were spent all but away from golf. Gallagher joined the Air Force, sat nuclear alert, fought in a couple of wars and suffered a fractured back in what he calls "an aircraft incident over Iraq."

"I never lost my love for the game, even when I was not playing," he says. "I kept up with the PGA Tour (he had some acquaintances there), read a ton of books and material. While I was in Saudi Arabia, someone sent me an old piece of Astroturf, I'd get some balls from (Morale, Welfare and Recreation), and hit balls out into the desert."

In 1994 he was transferred to a desk job at Langley Air Force Base in Hampton, where he re-immersed himself in the game, still using 20-year-old tour forged blades and persimmon woods. Nonetheless, he won the base championship from 1995-97, and was selected to play in the Ryder Cup-style Air Force Challenge Cup between the U.S. and the Royal Air Force, and later became an exchange officer with the RAF.

"My golf reputation preceded me," he says. "Because of the Air Force Challenge, I already knew many RAF officers, and the common ground of golf enabled us to rapidly break the ice of first introductions and provided a basis of trust and mutual respect as we moved to challenging issues ... like the



Gallagher was in Baghdad as a part of his military service.

he says, was like reuniting with an old friend.

"There's a smell at 7:30 or 8 a.m. on a golf course that's unmistakable," says Gallagher, a VSGA member at Eaglewood Golf Course in Virginia Beach. "The sprinklers have been on, the grass has just been trimmed and the greens smell fresh. You don't realize it when you play frequently.

"But when I went back for the first time after being away, I got a rush of memories. I remembered being up early with my dad, playing Keswick at the crack of dawn, the joys of being a kid and standing on the first tee at Keswick, elevated, and watching the ball disappear into a blue sky. All of that came back the first time I smelled the grass."

Colonel Gallagher returned to Langley AFB in 2005, and again immersed himself in golf, to the point where he won 11 of 14 events he played on a local amateur tour last summer. He also qualified for and competed in the VSGA State Amateur, the SunTrust State Open of Virginia and earned the second seed for match play at the VSGA Public Links Championship.

Yet another knee injury suffered in late October will require at least four more months of rehab before he can play again. His back issues continue, to the point where he cannot even practice putting.

"Been here before," he says. "When I've come back after two or three years without hitting a ball, there have been times I haven't been able to get a 3-iron off the ground. It's frustrating to feel so inept.

"But I was terrified after my back surgery that I wouldn't be able to get it back, that golf wouldn't be fun. Now I think that if I couldn't play competitively, I'd probably still play. We all have our physical limitations. I don't have to compare myself against the greats in Virginia, but against myself. I can beat my limitations, and those will all be successful days."

defense of the UK and NATO through air power."

In Saudi Arabia in 1995 on Operation Southern Watch, after Khobar Towers were bombed, Gallagher came under scud attack. Hurling himself under a table, he peered through his gas mask at someone he thought looked familiar. When the attack was over and both men removed their masks, Gallagher was face to face with one of the RAF officers against whom he'd played golf.

"I immediately felt more comfortable that we would do the right things to handle the situation," he says. "When you've seen someone who you know plays it where it lies, there's a bond that goes beyond just being allies. You can trust them, and that helps you cut through the bull pretty fast."

In 2002, he reinjured his back preparing to deploy to Afghanistan and hunt the terrorists behind the 9/11 attacks. He underwent radical surgery, but remained in command of his squadron and eventually was assigned to a base in Saudi Arabia. He took a bullet that grazed his shoulder that but for some luck could have been fatal. Gallagher never left his unit and stayed on duty, patrolling Baghdad every day.

Three weeks later, while in the third vehicle of a three-truck convoy assigned to assess a bridge Iraqi forces blew up while retreating from Baghdad, his vehicle was ambushed by terrorists and nearly crushed. Gallagher suffered second-degree burns and a snuff-box wrist fracture. He stayed in Baghdad until July 2003.

SWEET SENSATION

One month later, Gallagher received permission from his Florida back surgeon to begin chipping. The first time back on the course,

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