

FEATURE

Inside the Ropes

Volunteers at big events give their time in exchange for the best non-seat in the house

BY RAY TENNENBAUM





For a certain kind of fan, volunteering at a big-time golf tournament is a passion. The PGA Tour, the USGA, and the PGA of America depend on up to thousands to perform essential tasks from Admissions to Will Call, and the dedicated individuals who return year after year do it for many reasons: a sense of helping, the chance to work with others for a big event that contributes to charity, and the opportunity to make new friends and enjoy the company of old ones they've made through the years.

Some even get to watch the competition. Strolling inside the ropes alongside the best golfers in the world, watching them play the greatest courses ever designed, is a diversion every hardcore golf fan might envy, but one enjoyed by a select few: the volunteer walking scorers on the PGA Tour. A handful are

able to travel to multiple Tour and USGA stops around the country, including Long Island native Joe Calaban; at the age of 66 and with nearly thirty years' experience starting with the Northville Classic at the Meadow Brook Club, he takes pride and pleasure in the role.

Now retired from a career at AT&T, Calaban splits his time between East Quogue and Bradenton, Fla., and volunteers at tournaments up and down the East Coast. "I usually do three Tour events, and maybe two USGA events – I always do the U.S. Open, no matter where it is," he says. This year he'll travel to the Wells Fargo Championship at Quail Hollow, since he has two daughters living in Charlotte, then he'll be back home in the Hamptons to score the U.S. Open at Shinnecock Hills in June, and visit with old friends in Boston in September while he's volunteering at the Dell Technologies Championship.

You may have never seen a walking scorer – if they're doing their job well, they're invisible – but they play a critical role in a golf tournament by inputting scores to a handheld device at the conclusion of each hole so that scoreboards, broadcasts, and internet leaderboards can update scores

Center: Volunteers at the 2012 U.S. Senior Open. In circles, clockwise from lower left: Joe Calaban at the 2018 Valspar Championship in Tampa; MGA volunteer David Shunk at the U.S. Open Sectional Qualifier at Canoe Brook in June 2017; standard-bearer during the aggregate-score playoff at the Met Open in 2015.



instantaneously. During play, they note whether each player just used a wood or iron off the tee, and if the ball ended up in the fairway, intermediate cut, rough, or hazard; each entry signals the laser operator stationed at that hole to measure driving distance and a host of other data that feed into professional golf metrics systems like the PGA Tour's ShotLink. The results of each approach shot are similarly recorded: as Joe puts it, "At the Player's Championship, nobody's out there at the 17th hole counting how many guys went into the water that day, they know that number because we've been putting [each shot] into the computer."

Walking scorers don't keep the official score – that's still the job of the golfers and their caddies, who mark their fellow competitor's scorecard in traditional fashion – but when the player meets up with tournament officials in the scoring area after the round to tally up the numbers, the walking scorer is there standing by in case of any discrepancy. "They have made mistakes in the past, okay, and that's what the walking scorer is there for in the end," says Joe, "but mainly the walking scorer is there for the real-time data for the television." Each is equipped with a walkie-talkie, which ideally won't be needed to correct a scoring error; the radio also serves as a link to tournament central, for example to summon an official in case a player wants a ruling.

It's not an easy job to get; the scoring committee is one of the first to fill with volunteers, and generally speaking only the most experienced and reliable veterans get to walk with the marquee names on a late Saturday or Sunday. Each of the major championships has its own wrinkle: the USGA doesn't use ShotLink at the Open, but instead has its own version of the scoring system; the PGA of America usually allows host clubs to give their members first dibs on inside-the-ropes gigs; the Masters doesn't use walking scorers at all, preferring to deploy volunteers outside the ropes. The R&A is open to veteran walking scorers willing to travel and make their own arrangements for the British Open, though experience is required and persistence

not necessarily rewarded: as a bonus, the R&A supplies uniforms (and so does the Olympics).

Keeping the job demands more than just punching in numbers. "If you're a jerk, you don't get on my list," says the USGA's Director of Scoring Ross Galarneau. He also cites discretion as a valued resource. "One of the things we talk about with our volunteers is that these folks are spectators, they're not participants. They've got a good seat – great – but we want to make sure that none of them ever causes a problem."

"Once, in a Women's Open, we had a walking scorer who was very excited that one of her players who had just won a local qualifier was doing well and had two holes to go before the cut. The walking scorer said, 'All you have to do is par in, and you're going to make the cut.' Well, guess who didn't make the cut.... We always tell our walking scorers and standard bearers, 'We'd like you to meet the players on the first tee, but unless they start the conversation, we don't want you to talk to them again until you're done.'"

Talking to other scorers who have worked with Joe for decades, you understand how he's earned the respect of scoring committee chairs. Rob Dubester, a longtime Port Jefferson resident who moved to Naples, Fla., last year after his retirement, became friendly with Calaban when he started scoring at the Northville Long Island Classic in the early 90s. Dubester became a regular at Met Area events, and the two worked together frequently.

In 2009 at the U.S. Open at Bethpage, Dubester was chairman of the walking scorers committee and Calaban was chairing the leaderboard committee when the rainy weather wreaked havoc on the volunteers' schedules. "We had done everything in our power to try and get things done on our own without having to go to the USGA and say, 'We can't handle this, we just don't have the people to get it done,'" Dubester recalled. The two traded volunteers just to get

Jill Owens with Jason Day. Players are usually willing to cooperate with a scorer's reasonable request after the round.



THE STORIES THEY TELL

The folks with decades of experience have plenty of stories and love to share them – and their (usually) high opinion of the professionals they trail.

Mike Walsh, a Virginia-based friend of Calaban's and USGA stalwart, scored for Dustin Johnson and Lee Westwood Sunday at Oakmont at the U.S. Open in 2016. He says he got a couple of rounds and an overnight stay at Pine Valley out of it, because a member wanted to hear his account of Johnson's remarkable victory. Walsh remembers that Lee Westwood was peeved: "He thought it was his responsibility as a player [whether to call a penalty], that it wasn't up to the USGA to decide whether that ball moved, that it was up to Lee Westwood, since he was the guy officially keeping his score."



A few other impressions of the pros from those who've walked the fairways with them:

"My favorite I guess, this guy has treated me nice every time, and he's a lot nicer than everybody perceives him to be, and that's Tiger. Tiger Woods is a gentleman in the scoring trailer. And he'll sign everything except the ball, and I've scored for him I think five times and he's really cool."

"I like Rory McIlroy because he's pretty cool as well, Jordan Spieth is a gentleman."

"That Snedeker, he's a classy guy – a good, upstanding, positive, Huck Finn kind of guy."

"Adam Scott, I call him the Prince of the Tour, because he's a special, special guy... if he shoots 77, he's the same; if he shoots 65, he's still the same."

"Dustin Johnson's personality is such that nothing really bothers him, I've never seen him get torqued up, or throw a club, or say too many curse words, either. He's actually got a wry sense of humor – you might not think it but he's a pretty funny guy."

RAISE YOUR HAND

The MGA relies every bit as much on its corps of volunteers as the PGA Tour and USGA do, and is proud to have one of the largest and finest groups in the country. Without those who give their time to support the game, the MGA would be unable to stage the 100-plus events it holds per season, from the boys' and girls' juniors and the senior net four-ball all the way up to the Met Open and the U.S. Open's local and sectional qualifiers.

There are different ways to get involved – the MGA is always looking to add to its team of Committee Members. For more information on how you can get started with volunteering at MGA, LIGA and WGA events, visit www.mgagolf.org/volunteer or contact Mike Zamalkany at mzamalkany@mgagolf.org.

And don't miss the opportunity to get an up-close look at these big-time events that are coming to the Met Area soon:

The Northern Trust: Opening event of the FedEx Cup Playoffs, August 21-26, 2018, at The Ridgewood Country Club, Paramus, N.J. A fact sheet with all the details is available at www.pgatour.com/content/dam/pgatour/tournament-sites/pga-tour/r027/volunteer/2018/docs/VolunteerOverview-updated.pdf

Volunteer registration is at events.r2it.com/volunteer/northerntrust/2018/

PGA Championship: Major championship golf returns to Bethpage Black in the spring of 2019; volunteer registration is open now. Dates are May 12-19, 2019, at Bethpage State Park, Farmingdale, N.Y.; those who complete their assignments in 2019 will have priority for volunteering at the 2024 Ryder Cup, also at Bethpage Black.

To register, go to: PGA.com/2019Volunteer.



Madison Hearney, a senior at the University of Maryland, grew up in St. James, Long Island, and enjoyed playing golf for Saint Anthony's High School in Melville. She entered Maryland focused on a veterinary career, but eventually started considering event planning as a career option, particularly in the field of golf. In February 2017 she went to the Northern Trust tournament website to buy tickets for herself and her dad, when she saw the link for volunteers. "I thought, This is a great opportunity for me to experience a tournament from the ground up, I've been a huge golf fan for forever, so for me, personally, it'll be really cool.

"I was in Caddie Services," she says with a laugh. "It was actually really cool to be able to interact with the caddies and know that even if we were [just] sorting bibs and making sure that all of the nameplates were on straight... knowing that something that I personally did was going to be out there, and seen on TV, and used by the caddies – even something that small was really cool.

"My job for the Wednesday of the program was to stand on the first tee and hand out the caddie bibs. Which was the coolest experience that I've ever had, because all of the players came through the first tee that day... I could never go back to being on the outside, now that I've been this close.

"I kind of used it as a tester for me to see if I actually enjoyed the atmosphere as much as I thought I would, and I 100% did. Most days, I was there from 4:30 a.m. until 9:00 at night with a smile on my face, excited to get up and go the next day – which was not necessarily an experience I'd had in previous jobs or internships that I had."

This year will be PGA Tour executive Julie Tyson's first overseeing the Northern Trust, and she is candid about the passion she's seen. "From someone who didn't have a lot of experience at this level before – and I've been in golf a long time – the thing that was most surprising about every aspect of the tournament was how big a role the volunteers play in the success of a tournament. They are truly the unsung heroes of every PGA Tour tournament, no question.

"The other thing about volunteering and golf generally is it attracts really good people, and that's what brought me to golf a long, long time ago – I wanted to just work with really good people."

Fortunately, the Met Area has a lot of them. As Joe Calaban would be the first to admit, he's just one of thousands. ■

through the tournament, until Dubester was nearly out of options. "What Joe did was he left his post as chairman of the leaderboards and came over to be a walking scorer for that round. Just to help me out. That's one I'll never forget," says Dubester, who thought highly enough of Calaban to give him an IT job at the Brookhaven not-for-profit company where he worked.

It takes some doing to get where you want to be. As an associate at Simpson, Thacher in Manhattan in the mid-1980s, Jill Owens, now co-chair of the walking scorers committee for the Northern Trust, had never played golf until she joined an office buddy for a weekend round at Maple Moor ("One day he said, 'This weekend I'm playing golf, I haven't played since I was a kid.' I said, 'Not without me you're not!'"") Soon she had moved to Westchester and started playing solo rounds weekends at Saxon Woods, eventually joining a "very competitive" club without real estate that plays at Dunwoodie, whose club championship she's won twice. ("I've been close to a 6 [handicap] but now I'm about a 12, my game is going south.")

In 1993, she started volunteering at the Buick Classic at Westchester Country Club, marshalling at the third hole for a couple of years, "which was fun, but I knew there was

more for me. And I saw the inside-the-ropes jobs and that's where I wanted to be – absolutely, immediately, I knew I wanted that." The chair of the walking scorers committee took her on, and she took every assignment she could get, "for anybody and everybody – for three years I remember I never got anybody who anyone knew, except their mother and maybe their college golf coach. But it was great and I absolutely loved it right away." By the early 2000s, partly thanks to her willingness to take on clerical tasks no one else wanted, she became co-chair, and was able to score for what she calls "the premium groups."

Owens gets a little breathless and starstruck talking about the thrill. "I particularly remember scoring for Steve Stricker when he won at Westchester, what a gentleman he was – after this man had just won the golf tournament, he just kept praising me for the job I did and thanking me.... To have that insider view with these pros who are my heroes—if I can be around them, checking out their equipment, what they're wearing, just say 'Hi,' and then have them ask me how I'm doing, or remember my name from one time to another—it just absolutely floats my boat, that's for sure."

For some, volunteering is a learning process – and can even suggest a career path.