



The Reunion Cup

To our golf columnist the most prestigious tournament of all BY MICHAEL KONIK

WITH APOLOGIES to the the folks at Augusta National, the United States Golf Association, the PGA of America, and particularly The Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, Scotland, which puts on a little competition this month called the Open Championship—better known stateside as the British Open—the most important golf tournament of the year is none of the four recognized “majors.”

The entry requirements for this limited-field event are more stringent than for the Masters. Indeed, not a single member of the PGA TOUR meets the exemption qualifications.

More history and lore is attached to this exclusive competition than to the Ryder Cup. In fact, from the opening tee shot until the final putt, the lore and history are often more compelling than the shot-making.

I speak not of the U.S. Amateur Championship, the World Golf Championships or the Lincoln Financial Group Battle at Bighorn.

I'm talking about the holiest tournament of them all.

The Reunion Cup.

You may not have heard of this 36-hole match-play competition, possibly the most elite and compelling event on the golf calendar. That's because television rights have never been granted. The Cup has somehow flown under the national media's radar, accumulating in the process a mystique and aura that would put Yankee Stadium, not to mention Shadow Creek Golf Club, to shame.

This is the 10-year anniversary of the Reunion Cup. The site selection committee, which carefully considers bids from every region of the United States (particularly those that offer cheap greens fees and deals on lodging), has a keen taste for tradition, for courses that have played an integral role in Cup legend. So the 2002 Reunion Cup will be held where it all began, way back in the 1990s, in Milwaukee at the popular Brown Deer Park Golf Course—if someone can get a tee time.

I am proud to report that I'm the reigning Reunion Cup champion, a title that carries far more responsibility than merely displaying the sacred Cup prominently on my mantel. I have to do things like host the Champions Dinner, a semisecret dining experience held the evening before the first round of the tournament and open only to Cup competitors. I also have to make sure the Cup is transported safely from my home in Los Angeles to the golf course in Milwaukee. And it's not easy stuffing the trophy—which resembles an elegant cross between the Claret Jug and Sam Ryder's vessel—into an overhead bin without snapping off the miniature golden plastic golf club clutched in the miniature golden plastic hands of the miniature Everyman golfer who stands perched atop the faux golden cup.

Being Reunion Cup champion is, of course, a privilege and an honor and a tremendous responsibility, what with being a role model and all. It's a thrill that I've enjoyed on five occasions. Sure, Jack's won six green jackets at Augusta, but who did he have to beat?

Me? Each time I've earned the Reunion Cup, I've vanquished foes like David Hanson, Michael “Himmy” Himmelfarb and Kevin Zarem.

Well, not foes *like* those three.

I mean, those three.

We would gladly welcome other entrants into this prestigious tournament, but the bylaws are awfully strict. To play in the Reunion Cup, you've got to have graduated from Nicolet High School in Glendale, Wisconsin, Class of 1983. If the rules were relaxed and graduates from the Class of '82 were allowed, our schoolmate and PGA Tour hotshot Jules "Skip" Kendall would be eligible, and that wouldn't be very fair to him, because after all those years competing for millions of dollars against Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson, Skippy wouldn't know how to step up his game for the crucial moment when a grape soda, bought by your buddies, is on the line. Furthermore, to play in the Reunion Cup, you have to meet at least three of four other stringent eligibility requirements:

- You were a member of the 1974 B'nai Brith Little League champion White Sox.
- When you were between the ages of 7 and 10, you were regularly invited to Kevin Zarem's famous Putt-Putt golf birthday parties.
- At one time or another during your childhood, you had a backyard touching (or nearly touching) the yard of another fully exempt member of the Reunion Cup field.
- You attended Marty Seidel's bar mitzvah.

Then you're in.

Understandably, the Reunion Cup field is usually—all right, always—a foursome. Dave, Himmy, Kevin and I.

We meet somewhere fun, such as Las Vegas, Houston or suburban Milwaukee; get a couple of hotel rooms; find a suitable greasy spoon for the time-honored Loser's Breakfast, in which the previous year's laggard picks up the tab; reminisce about our it-seems-like-yesterday childhood; tell the same jokes and the same stories; exchange gifts; read "Best Wishes to the Reunion Cup Field" notes from the likes of Corey Pavin, Oscar de la Hoya and Gary McCord (the golf writer member of the foursome occasionally being good for something); laugh way too much; sleep way too little; and, oh yeah, play some golf.

Life doesn't get much better.

The Grass Office: Kingsbarns, Scotland

If I hadn't been told that the **Kingsbarns Golf Links** (44-1334-460-860; www.kingsbarns.com), 20 minutes from the sacred playing ground of the Old Course at St. Andrews, was entirely man-made, I would have assumed that the spectacular dunes over which the course trundles had been there in the Kingdom of Fife forever. So artful is American architect Kyle Phillips' creation that you soon forget that this links is not ancient at all, but a stupendous marriage of engineering, location and ingenuity. It's the kind of course that requires a photograph as often as a crisply struck bump-and-run shot. The landing and target areas are enormous, befitting a layout that rubs up against the North Sea on a third of the holes and views it from the rest. I can't imagine anyone not liking this magnificent golf course—except, possibly, people who don't like the game of golf. **Greens fee: £185 (US\$270).**—*M.K.*

We conducted the first Reunion Cup at Brown Deer Park, the course we more or less grew up on. (Back when we were youngsters, before the PGA Tour began using it for the Greater Milwaukee Open, getting on was easy, even though we lacked golf shoes, collared shirts and a remedial understanding of how to swing a golf club.) Kevin, a real estate appraiser and the father of two girls, won that first Cup, back in 1993, when I graciously quintuple-bogeyed the last hole. I don't remember much else about the first congregation, other than it seemed like a fine idea to walk down a tree-lined fairway with my old pals, retracing the steps we had taken dozens of times in our past, before we knew what would become of our lives, what failures and triumphs we would experience as adults. Here we were, lads who once spent every day—and many nights—playing together, making up games, concocting dreams. Yet, thanks to the vagaries of time and distance, we hardly ever saw one another anymore. We couldn't stop growing old. But having a Reunion Cup seemed like a good way to make sure we didn't grow apart.

In 1996 we held the Cup near Torch Lake, Michigan, so we could visit the grave of Dave's dad, the first of our parents to pass on.

In 1997 we met back in Wisconsin, so I could be among friends and family in the wake of a divorce.

In 2000 we played in Vegas, so Himmy wouldn't have to travel too far from his new bride.

Marriages, births, deaths. Promotions, transfers, awards. Little plans and big dreams—we've shared them all, in the company of our best friends, all the while pretending to play a game called golf.

Last year the Reunion Cup was held in San Francisco, where Himmy, a marketing executive with Lycos, now lives with his wife and daughter. (It was Himmy's turn on the rota to play host.) We stayed in a huge suite at the Half Moon Bay Lodge, sustaining ourselves on cookies from the in-room minibar between various gala dinners, whose sponsor is carefully indicated in the tournament bylaws, maintained by our chief archivist and lead counsel, David, an intellectual property lawyer and father of three. The wives would have loved the Half Moon Bay Lodge (fireplaces, balconies, fresh flowers) as much as we loved the scenic seaside links. But though there's been some talk of making Reunion Cup weekends into a "couples" affair, we've steadfastly preserved the all-boys character of the event. The girls wouldn't get our jokes, our stupid nicknames, our Byzantine volume of rules and regulations: "Konik shall be assessed a one-stroke penalty for referring to himself in the third person," or "Hanson shall be assessed stroke-and-distance for references to billable hours." And they wouldn't get our inscrutable joy in playing consistently horrible golf.

We have families and jobs and mortgages. We see each other twice a year if we're lucky. And we're still best friends.

The golf course is merely an excuse for us to be together, free of responsibilities and cares, free from everything that keeps us separated. Dave and Himmy never break 100. Kevin, a serious player who still lives in Wisconsin and therefore enjoys a golf season slightly longer than that for ice fishing, sometimes wins the Cup and sometimes shoots 20-over. (And sometimes does both simultaneously.) But no matter how rotten our scores, no matter how many balls are lost—Dave one year ran through nearly two dozen (in 18 holes)—we cherish the brief time we can spend in the company of men who knew us as boys, with whom there are no secrets, only a shared history.

Joking aside, this is why the Reunion Cup really is the most important golf tournament of the year—at least to four guys from Wisconsin. 🏌️

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