

# The Professional

BY RYAN MILLAR

I wouldn't say I'm proud of it, exactly. Although there is some measure of perverse joy I get out of the fact that the most embarrassing thing I've ever done ended up on live national television. Perhaps because it's not just a one-off moment; there are lessons to be drawn from it.

Let me explain.

In 2001 I went to live in Kauai for a couple months. My favourite uncle had somewhat extended an invitation years before, or I had hinted at my intentions and not received a clear no, I don't remember which exactly. The point is: I went. I had been working dead-end service industry jobs for a couple of years, just drifting. So I decided to drift to Kauai. I let my uncle know my plan, and he let me know that he could use an extra pair of hands. He even seemed receptive to the idea.

It took a while for me to adjust to island life. I'm generally pasty, even by Canadian standards, and a bit of a busybody, so when I arrived, the burning sun and slow pace of life hit me hard. But I got used to the aimless wandering. I became like a gentle evening breeze. My uncle, bless him and his kindness towards a freeloading nephew, left me with a car to get around, and the beachfront condo to myself during the day. Living was easy.

My days mostly consisted of rising late, going to the beach and jumping off a cliff into the ocean. Then I would swim back to shore, walk back to my uncle's condominium and eat a leisurely breakfast while watching back-to-back reruns of *Kids in the Hall* on Comedy Central. And the rest of the day I didn't get up to much.

However, two months after my arrival an opportunity to see the 'Grand Slam of Golf' presented itself. I really don't care that much about golf; I've never actually golfed, in fact. Like all sports, it is faintly ridiculous. However, I do appreciate the friendly competition and fresh air of mini-golf. But perhaps most importantly, I am in possession of a well-tuned appreciation for spectacle and

celebrity. The clincher for my attendance was the fact that my uncle could score me a free weekend pass.

The 'Grand Slam of Golf' takes the winners of the four major tournaments and pits them against one another. Four men, two rounds, one winner: it's the PGA equivalent of the Cage Match. 2001 had Retief Goosen, Tiger Woods, and a couple other guys with names that don't sound like animals. I was cheering for Retief, narrowly beating Tiger in the name sweepstakes for my affection. The clincher being the fact that he (and the other two guys whose names I forget) were obviously underdogs. And I like to root for the underdog. This long ago, Tiger had no redemption story, he was just an incredibly driven, seemingly-unstoppable golfing machine. His sex life still not public knowledge.

The two rounds of 18 holes were back-to-back: one Saturday, one Sunday. I woke up to a brilliantly sunny day the Saturday it began. I walked over to the Poipu Bay Golf Course just before noon. At the time, this seemed mildly industrious of me. On the back of my ticket the rules of engagement were clearly stated: foremost among them was 'No Unauthorized Cameras'. This was the main reason that my disposable camera, which usually accompanied me everywhere I went, stayed behind on my bed. Imagine my surprise when I cruised hole to hole with the rest of the gallery and every other person or so had a camera, surreptitiously taking photos of Tiger and the golfing gang.

I was so taken by the experience that the next day I went back to see the second round. As I left I remembered to grab my camera, because 'Be the only one following the rules once, shame on the rules, but if I'm the only one following the rules twice, then I'm a wimp and a sucker'. So I put it in my pocket, and set off. Day two was even better than day one. I had invested myself a little in the golf, and I think Retief had actually come out on top after the first round. Nonetheless, things were close, real

close. Exciting!

Me and my camera caught up for the back nine. As I trotted along I nervously snapped a couple of pictures, of the caddies, of the golfers' backs, but none were really that great; none had Tiger Woods in them that's for sure.

On the 15th hole, I finally seized my moment. I was standing near the back of the gallery to the right of, and behind, Tiger. I saw my chance as he was teeing off. Some other larger, more professional-looking cameras went off, and then Tiger entered his backswing. Time slowed to a crawl as I slipped my camera out of the pocket of my shorts, hoisted it into the air, furtively looking around to make sure no one was watching. Luckily everyone was hypnotized by Tiger's fluid backswing. Slowly I pressed the button. For a moment time seemed to freeze in the golf-gallery silence. Then suddenly an earth-shattering "CLICK!" burst from my camera. I had never heard it so loud, I was shocked.

Everything that happened next happened very quickly. I tucked my yellow camera in my pocket with an instinctive smoothness honed by years of teenaged shoplifting. Tiger stepped back off the tee, and simultaneously 150 or so heads whirled in my direction, the direction of the horrendous, offensive click. Seeing no other option, I whirled my head around too, and did my best to look indignant.

Behind me was a middle-aged man. Golf enthusiast, if I had to guess. Bit of a shutterbug too, judging by the camera around his neck. So I swivelled too, offering the back of my head, instead of my guilty face, to the rest of the gallery. I could feel all of the accusing glares skipping past me and slamming into this innocent bystander. The Course Marshall stood at his position of authority on the tee box and rained down some choice words on the alleged culprit.

But the strongest, and most vitriolic reaction came from the Tiger himself, as he stepped off the tee, he yanked his hat off his head and menacingly patrolled the corner of the tee box, staring daggers in our direction.

I was mortified of course. It was small comfort that everybody in the gallery believed the offender was the innocent man standing behind me. Because that innocent man knew who the culprit was. He was standing face-to-face with him.

I mumbled an apology at him once everyone had refocused their attention on the golfers, but I imagine that just made him want to punch my dumb face all that much more. However, my anxiety and embarrassment eventually subsided and I was able to enjoy the rest of the afternoon (though I took no more pictures).

Later that day I made my way into the centre of town and went to a local pub for a beer; as I already explained, those were the kind of aimless days I lived while in Hawaii. I noticed that the TV was replaying that day's 'Grand Slam of Golf' event on ESPN. I didn't pay much attention, because I had been there and seen it live. I had also embarrassed myself there, and so I even went so far as to attempt to block it out. However, at one point, minutes after my bottle of beer had been set down in front of me, a velvety voice reached down to me from the TV high up behind the bar.

"Euh, that's paahr fahrm. Somebahdy in the gallahry hahs tahken a pho-toh," purred the commentator, in his hushed and heavily-accented golf announcer voice.

"That's right," clucked the co-announcer, less accented but equally admonishing, "shame on that ignorant loser. What a dark day in the world of sport."

And there, on the screen Tiger was stomping angrily around the tee box, as I had seen him do earlier, and the whole event was being tsked about on national television. I finished my beer and slinked out.

That was many years ago now, and the shame and embarrassment scabbed and scarred, eventually becoming an object of perverse pride - my unusual brush with golfing greatness. It served me well as an amusing anecdote of my time in Hawaii, punctuated as the story would be by the picture in my photo album.

It warrants mentioning at this point that the photo is of really, really, poor quality: Tiger is actually quite far away, and just a shadowy whiff of a man dressed in khaki, almost lost in a field of green. I've never had the photographic eye I felt I should, and that's when I'm trying to take good photos. When I'm in the back of a crowd far away from the subject, using a disposable camera, and picture-taking is forbidden, the result is pitiful. But it's not really the point: the whole adventure, from golf course to pub, that was the thrust; the poor quality of the visual aid just underscored the hilarity.

One day recently, while poking around a bookstore, I bought a self-help book entitled: "The War of Art," and subtitled "Break through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles." Like my photography, my creative output has never quite matched my self-belief: procrastination or circumstance always interferes. This book seemed to be the tonic to cure me. I was drawn to the simple, clean cover design, and pushed to purchase by the quote on the cover "A vital gem...a kick in the ass"-Esquire. I put a lot of stock in what other people think of things.

It made good toilet reading. It is inspirational in fact, a kick in the ass, even. It is not so much about how to become a better artist, but rather how to be 'Professional' at what you do. According to author Steven Pressfield, to become 'Professional' one needs to combat and beat 'Resistance'. 'Resistance' comes in many forms and wants you to fail, you need to battle both this inner 'Resistance', and the 'Resistance' of external forces, by staying dedicated to your purpose in order to realise your dream of becoming a 'Professional', of turning Pro.

Pressfield illustrates his point using all kinds of examples: Sylvester Stallone staying up three straight nights to write the script for Rocky, or himself moving into his van with his old typewriter to write screenplays. But his favourite example of a 'Professional', by far, is everybody's favourite black golfer, Tiger Woods. In fact, he tells so many stories about Tiger that he writes, in his chapter, 'A Professional Self-Validates': "Can you stand another

Tiger Woods story?" He then goes on to explain

*"With four holes to go on the final day of the 2001 Masters (which Tiger went on to win, completing the all-four-majors-at-one-time Slam), some chucklehead in the gallery snapped a camera shutter at the top of Tiger's backswing. Incredibly Tiger was able to pull up in mid-swing and back off the shot. But that wasn't the amazing part. After looking daggers at the malefactor, Tiger recomposed himself, stepped back to the ball, and striped it 310 down the middle."*

I blinked. What? No, it can't be. I slammed the book shut, my mind racing: "this must've been another incident he's writing about. Shit. It wasn't me. Was it?" I opened the book again, and continued reading. It was me. For sure. I felt the old embarrassment and shame return. My anecdote wasn't funny anymore. I put the book away for a while.

Then I thought about the irony: here I am reading a book about how to become a 'Professional', and learn how to triumph over adversity, and it turns out that I am, in fact, that adversity. For Tiger Woods! And such an adverse force that I warrant a whole chapter in a self-help book. That's awesome...right?

I tried to get behind my newfound role as a force of adversity, but I couldn't do it.

Then I realized what it was that was really bothering me about being described as a "chucklehead" in print: Pressfield's anecdote about Tiger Woods was telling only half the story. Only Tiger's side. What about the chucklehead? Nobody reading the book would realize the other side of the story. So I conquered my 'Resistance' and told it.

I was the one who, that day, risked the scorn of the squares, intent on depriving a golf newbie of his brush with greatness. I was the one who turned that moment into a great story, and drew lessons from it. Although my lesson: 'incredibly public humiliation makes a decent anecdote', doesn't quite pack the inspirational oomph of Pressfield's, it's probably more applicable to the majority of the population.