

Caddying is timing: An interview with Joe Skovron, PGA Tour caddy

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Abstract

Previous journalistic (Donegan, 1998), anecdotal (e.g., Abram & O’Byrne, 1996; Dabell, 1997, 200) and research literature (Lavalley, Bruce, & Gorely, 2004) suggests the golfer-caddie partnership is important to performance. The following interview is with Joe Skovron, a former professional golfer and college coach, who caddies for a top player on the PGA tour. Joe provides valuable insight into his role and our how their relationship works both on and off the golf course.

Can you tell me about your role as a PGA tour caddy?

Everybody’s role differs a little bit. Personally mine differs from someone else’s but some of the general things you’re doing are: hours at the golf course, yardages, reading the greens, aiding in practices, amongst other things. Besides that, it’s the relationship with the player. There’s definitely going to be some psychological factors that come in. For example, what you’re talking about in between shots, overall encouragement, keeping your player thinking correctly and just encouraging good

things going on with them. Besides that, off the golf course I think it depends on the relationship with the caddy, what’s required of them. Some players get their caddies more involved with practice sessions during off weeks if they live in the same city. Some players live in a different country and just show up at the tournament and it works that way. It all depends on that specific caddy-player relationship.

What's it like being a PGA tour caddy for one of the best players in the world?

To me it's fantastic for many reasons. In a short period of time I've gotten to experience things I dreamt about as a kid. To me the best part about it is when you're competing at the highest level. For me, it's all about playing in those big events, being in those situations, mixing it up, and seeing what your player can do in those pressure packed situations. Some of my advantages compared to maybe a caddy that's working for a guy that's not as high in the ranking, is that we are playing in the bigger events, traveling to places around the globe, and being exposed to a lot of really cool people, places, and things. Working for a Top-50 player in the world definitely has a ton of advantages and to me makes it one of the best jobs in the world. With that, as your player's popularity increases you also start having to deal with new challenges like having to deal with crowds, on the spot autograph and time requests for your player, and getting them [the players] to and fro in a timely manner. You get a bit more "protective" of your player with outside people.

What's it like dealing with the crowd?

What's your role in all that?

I think, my player, does a great job with it and his agent does a great job with it, so it makes it easier on me, but I think there's times when you have to protect your player and you have to be the guy that steps up and says something. For example, there are times when your player is trying to prepare for a round of golf, playing a practice round, or on their way to the tee and people are asking for autographs. There's a time and a place and sometimes you have to help them manage that. Other things, like when the crowd gets bigger either for your group or the pairings around you. Dealing with the crowd is something I've learned, making

sure no one's moving behind the green, people are not talking or taking pictures, etc. My player is very easy with that stuff because he's not real particular, he pulls the trigger pretty quick and not much bothers him but you still have to make sure nothing distracting is going on outside the ropes.

Address your role outside the ropes maybe before a tournament or after a tournament.

Outside the ropes might be a little bit different because we were friends before I started working for him. I've known him since he was five years old and watched him grow up. I'm older than him. He's my boss but we also have a relationship back from him being a little kid. So we definitely spend some time together off of the golf course whether it be dinner or staying at his house a couple days before or after a tournament. Traveling together occasionally, but not all the time. Sometimes sharing a room, we might have done that three-four times this year. It goes a bit more in depth with us because of the dynamic with the friendship.

Do you think your relationship helps you be a better caddy?

I do, I'm one of those guys, and I don't think I would be a caddy just for the paycheck. I think having an emotional investment in the person and really caring about them and their success is important rather than just the basics you get from their success. I know plenty of guys that have been successful in different ways but you look at their relationships and they have developed over time. The big caddy/ player partnerships that you can think of or that you look at have become friends and whether they were friends before or become friends after I think the relationship is an important part in the trust factor and knowing that your caddy has your back in any circumstance.

Is it a strength of good players to not have to share everything with their caddy? Do some bad players maybe rely on their caddy too much?

When people name off the best caddies, they usually name the caddies with the best players. But a lot of times the information you're giving may be a lot less than the caddy working a player who is lower in the world rankings and who might be more reliant on his caddy. I think to be a great player you have to accept all the responsibility. They are making the final decision and pulling the trigger. I think that if you look into it you will see that the best players in the world take full responsibility for what goes on out there. I can't think of many times when I have heard Tiger Woods or Phil Mickelson blame losing a tournament on their caddy. That being said, there is obviously times when caddies make mistakes that contribute to their player making a mistake and we deserve a bit of blame. We are the first one's to know when we make a mistake, and I know when I make a mistake I feel terrible about it. I think communication is extremely important in the caddy/player relationship. They pay us to be prepared and provide accurate information. When it comes to decision making, all we can do is be as prepared as possible to give them the best opinion we can and go from there. Ultimately, the player makes the final decision and he has to be comfortable with it, right or wrong. As one of my friends likes to say "there is a reason their name is on the bag."

How important do you think your role is as a caddy?

That is something that the player has to answer in my opinion. I think only the player knows how valuable his or her caddy is. It really comes down to the player being able to hit shots and perform under pressure. The caddy can support that but I don't really

think they can create that. I mean there's an old saying "you're only as good as your player is". Even though you might be able to help your player improve in certain areas and instill confidence in them or that reassurance at the right time or set them up with a club or whatever that might be, it still comes down to them.

How important is a caddy to the mentality of the player and how they're performing?

It would depend on the player and what his need is. I think what gets overlooked a lot of the time is a caddy and player's relationship in-between shots, how they're talking in between shots. How they talk after the round. How the caddy takes the failures and how the player takes the failures. How the caddy takes success just like the player takes the success. How the caddy deals with bad shots just like the player deals with bad shots. It's somewhat like a coach, if you're getting down, obviously, the player is getting down and if the player is getting down you can't be getting down. I think it's very important for a caddy to not have too many highs and too many lows and stay positive as much as possible because it's just like when you're around positive people, eventually it's going seep through. If you're around people that are negative eventually that's going seep through too. Lastly, I think that always having your players back and trusting in their abilities is extremely important.

Is there anything that you do to kind of keep your own mental game in check?

I learned a lot as a player regarding what I should have done and should have been applying while I was playing. It's important to not let your player see concern or doubt on your face. I think I've naturally gotten to that point and I think being around each other helped me get to that point even more

because he doesn't doubt me very often either.

Do the mental challenges for you change when you're playing really well? What are the mental challenges for you?

I actually think for us and for our relationship things get easier when we're in the hunt. That's where we both want to be and that's where we're comfortable. I know that speeding up has been one of our tendencies; things get faster and sometimes we just need to slow down a bit. Slow down your walk, your breathing, and your pre-shot routine. Make sure you've got all the information assessed, make your decision, and then just react and go. Sometimes things can start moving fast and we can get distracted by outside factors that don't give us an effective shot. You just have to stay in your routine as much as possible and maybe slow down a bit more to make sure you're taking all the numbers [distances] and factors that allow you to make the right decision.

Is it more difficult as a caddy when your player's just not playing so well?

I think that's the hardest part about being a caddy, you want to be able to help. I know that's my personality. I want to be able to help, I want to be able to say something that's going to make you get better, otherwise you feel kind of helpless. Sometimes there's nothing you can do. Sometimes just sitting back is the best thing you can do. You can overdo it and try to force it, and sometimes you just have to let that happen and let it take its course. You've done your job and that's all you can do, it's just going to take its course. That was something that was hard for me. Because I was always the guy that wanted to say something, control something, get something going. Sometimes, there's nothing to be said and you just got to lay back.

Does that just come with experience?

Knowing your player?

Oh yeah, so much of caddying is just timing. You might be saying the exact right thing but maybe it's the wrong timing. Maybe you needed to be a hole earlier, maybe you needed to be a hole later, maybe you needed to be a day later, and maybe you need to be a week earlier.

Can you elaborate on that? Do you have an example of when the timing was right or when it wasn't right?

I've noticed that there's so many times where you could say something but choose not to that ends up being the best thing or you choose not to and you should have said something. With that, I think it comes from what you believe in. If they ask you for your opinion you need to say it at that time and you need to give them your opinion whether it be a club or whatever. One thing I've learned is that if they're asking you they're probably not completely sure and if they are sure they'll just kind of throw out your opinion anyway. That's why I think it's important to give your opinion. But when it comes to things like attitude and inspiration I think it's really important to pick the right time and I think there's a feel for it.

If you've misread a couple putts what do you do to be confident that your next read will be on?

That's tough, you just have to keep reading them and do the best you can and go that direction. Depending on the player they might go away from asking you for a while if you've misread a couple. They [the players] might think it's important [to not ask] although it can affect a caddy's confidence. I've seen it happen in other caddy relationships where the caddy just gets reamed for it. I think that it's important that the player doesn't do that because then a caddy can stop giving their full opinion and

just agreeing with what the player has in their head in order to protect their job or whatever. A caddy is going to be wrong sometimes, but both the player and caddy have to deal with it and move on just as if the player hits a bad shot. All you can do is do your best, and to prepare the best you can, you're going to give opinions that are wrong sometimes, you just are. I think it's important for both the player and the caddy just to stick to their routines and get going at it and not lose that trust. Obviously if you're messing up over and over there is something that needs to be checked out in that relationship to see if that trust is still there or if something is wrong with that relationship.

What was your fondest memory of this past season (2010)?

The Ryder cup for sure. The week of the Ryder cup was unbelievable. Getting to be around the best in the game, hanging with guys I had looked up to my whole life, being a partner with the guy that I wanted to be with when I was 11 years old, unbelievable. As a player I always dreamed of winning The Masters and playing in a Ryder Cup. I was a team sports guy and representing your country and being part of a team makes it that much more special than anything else that you do. On top of that, the way that my player finished the last five holes, being in the most pressure packed situation in golf, made it extremely special. The way it came down to him and the last match with the Ryder cup on the line. That's pretty fun stuff. The only thing that could have made the week better would have been bringing home the cup.

Can you describe that experience?

He was playing well all week. It got away from us 9 through 12. It just all of a sudden got away. I think we lost two or three of those holes and all of a sudden we are four down. It just kind of came out of nowhere. It

wasn't like he played bad the whole day or anything like that. Just a couple bad shots and boom, you're down down. Then we saw these things happen in front of us and all of a sudden this comeback was in place. He just got up on there on the tee on 13 and our opponent gave us an opening, he hit it way left off the tee on the par three. I said there's our opening, let's go hit a good golf shot. He knew exactly what to do; he made three and won the hole. We went to 14 and our opponent hit another bad one off the tee and my player hit a great tee shot, we were sitting up there just perfect and then our opponent pulled off a great shot to tie the hole. Heading to 15 three down it got to where we just said, "let's just keep taking him one more hole" and that's all we really concentrated on was let's take him one more hole. I kept saying that over and over to [player]; "let's take him one more hole". Whether we win this match or not, the game was different in that situation than it was in individual tournament. We felt like the longer we take him; the more it gives the other US Player on the course a chance in his match. You kind of feed off the momentum of other teammates. My player hit a great shot into 16 and won that hole. 17 he hit it in there and made that putt. All of a sudden we go to 18. If anyone was watching a telecast and saw the putt he made on 18, that's about as good as it gets. The highest pressure he has ever experienced brought out the best golf in him.

What did you do to keep your emotions in check in the Ryder Cup?

I kept thinking about the process and what we were trying to do out there. Obviously it was exciting and obviously it was fun. More than anything it kept our adrenaline flowing but also helped me be ultra focused on what I was doing with my job and what I was seeing rather than getting caught up in all the other stuff. The key is to not get scared,

your nerves almost make you that much more focused and make you that much better when you feel those nerves. If you're going to caddy for high level players you've got to be able to deal with that. I don't know if there's anything I did to combat it rather than focus on what we were trying to do. I didn't feel like it was that hard to do, you go through the process, you do your thing, you get your numbers, and you just stay positive with him. Especially in that tournament, I just kept reiterating "ok let's take it one more hole, let's take it one more shot, let's hit a good shot here, and let's hit a good shot here". As a caddy you don't have to physically perform the shots so it makes it a lot easier to stay calm under pressure. And when you REALLY believe in your player it makes it much easier to deal with all that is at stake as well.

Do you think that is something you just kind of have it or you don't?

Yeah, without being a sports psychologist, being around sports as much as I have, I think you can develop a certain amount of it. I think that's maybe why guys hit their prime at different times and maybe realize how to deal with the pressure and do those things. But to react like that the first time at the Ryder cup, that's something that you're born with and that's something that's inside that only special people have, and he has that. That kind of pressure you just respond to it differently. You know, when he describes those putts, people ask him if he was nervous and he said he wasn't nervous when he got over the putt because he was so concerned with his process and getting the read right and hitting a good putt and all those things that all that other stuff went out the door. That's just something that strengthened over time with his successes and his confidence in himself but that's something that you just have or you don't have.

Are those the moments that kind of solidify your confidence and make you a stronger player?

Yeah, we did play five more events after that and he finished 22nd and 25th in two of those. He had a third, a fourth, and a fifth as well. I don't think it changed anything but I think it solidified that he can make the putts under pressure and he made a few more putts the rest of the year. I also think it's something that we can draw on down the stretch at any time and can give him a lot of confidence down the stretch as a finisher. I also think, and other players will have to answer this, but other players took notice of it. If his name is on the board I don't think anyone is going to expect him to go backwards because of what they saw at that Ryder cup. And I might be wrong on that but I got a lot of comments from some big time players on how impressed they were at how he handled that and I think a lot of people took notice of that. One way or another, the Ryder Cup finish will benefit us at some point when we are in a pressure situation.

What happens in between shots between you and your player?

I think that everyone is a little different but sometimes we won't talk at all, but mostly we'll talk about something that happened the day before or maybe something that happened at dinner or we'll joke around about something or maybe we'll pick something out in the crowd that I see that might be funny. If I think there is a time when something funny needs to be said I'm definitely not scared of walking up and cracking a joke about whatever it needs to be about. I think that's important. But really the conversations vary but they're very rarely about golf. They might be about golf for a little time after he hits a shot and we're talking about something that didn't react the way we thought it would but that's only for

20-30 seconds then we're talking about something else. A lot of times you're talking about whatever comes to mind, whatever chitchat there might be and another player is involved in chitchat and whatnot. I think that's important to kind of take a break in between shots and not always be focused on golf. Every player is a little bit different. We are both laid back out there so you'll see us kind of laughing and joking a lot of the time in-between shots even coming down the stretch. I definitely think that's the way it's supposed to be and that's what it's about. You know some people take that as you don't care sometimes but I think that's completely wrong, it's more that you're enjoying what you're doing and having a love for what you're doing. I think if anything it helps your performance. If you're laughing and joking and doing those things it kind of relieves a little bit of stress or pressure.

Do caddies experience flow or being in the zone?

I definitely think you have your days where you just read greens well and every time

they [the player] get over a shot you know what that shot calls for, it's a little seven iron here, it's a little six iron here. You have your days where you really get it. You can call that in the zone, call it whatever you want, but you know you have those moments where you're getting everything right. You also have those days where it's a struggle and you've got to go through things in your mind that don't usually bother you. For example, when you're not seeing the greens very well, you definitely have those days where you have to work that much harder to figure it out when they ask you something. You know you're worrying a little bit more about the information you're giving, than the process, I don't know what it is or why it is, but you just have your days like that when you're not quite as sharp. Even if you prepared the same way, maybe you're just not seeing things the same.

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