

# LINKS

The Best Of Golf

## AMERICAN BEAUTIES

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# TOUR Insider

You haven't experienced the Players Championship until you've done so as a member of the Tour Club, which offers numerous amenities, including unparalleled behind-the-scenes access to PGA Tour tournaments

BY HUNKI YUN

**I'VE BEEN** to the Players Championship under several different guises.

As the occupant of the lowest rung on the editorial ladder of another golf magazine, it was my job to do the grunt work for an instructional photo shoot at TPC Sawgrass on the Wednesday before the tournament. The photographer and I chose a spot on the Dye's Valley, the second course at Sawgrass. Then I had to beg, borrow and steal to secure a cart before praying like crazy that the player wouldn't be more than 30 minutes late for our pre-arranged rendezvous, at which his first words invariably were: "How long's this going to take?"

As a reporter covering the Players Championship for the *Orlando Sentinel* in 2000, I got up at dawn every morning so I could get to the course before the crowds arrived, watched golf all day, wrote into the night, and left hours after the last player had putted out. Rain interrupted the final round, which

was completed on Monday, washing out the only day off I was scheduled to have in March.


As an ordinary fan, I walked around in the heat, battling the crowds for a glimpse of my favorite players as I sipped warm beer and spilled mustard on my shirt while walking and eating in a hurry.

I finally did the Players Championship right this year—with the Tour Club. Launched in February under a licensing deal with the PGA Tour, the club offers access to a wide variety of courses, properties and experiences. Members can enjoy the TPC network of courses, play at other private clubs, stay at luxury golf residences and learn from instructors at Tour Academy facilities.

Some of the non-TPC properties available to members include California's Pelican Hill and Sage Valley in South Carolina. But the one amenity that is unique to the Tour Club is its PGA Tour tournament experiences.

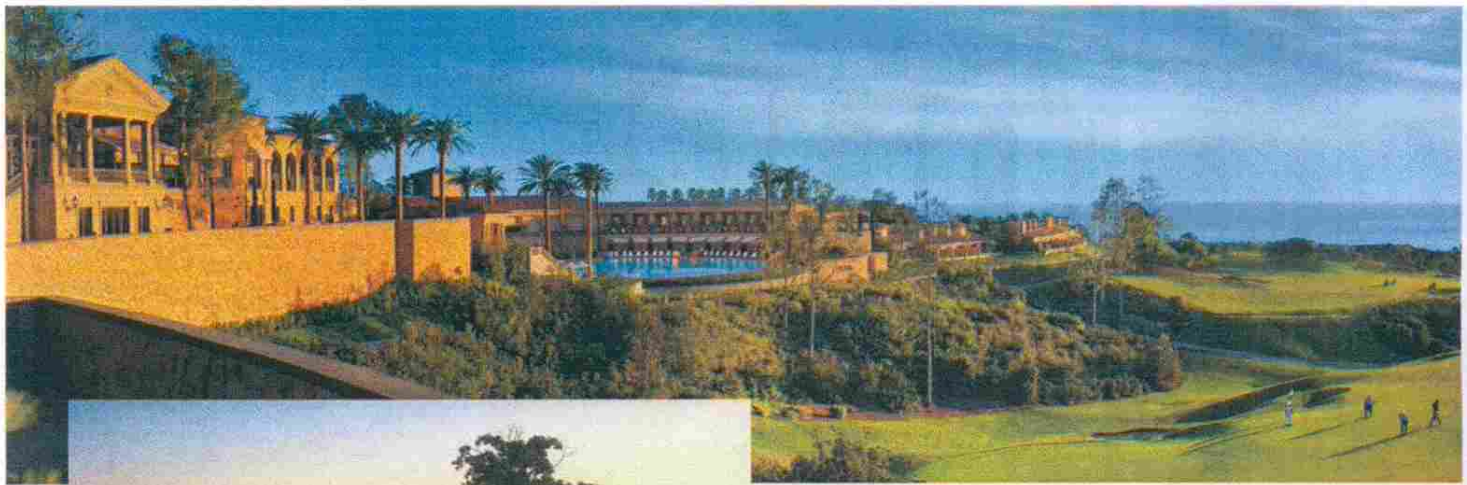
At Sawgrass, we received "behind-the-ropes" tours of both the tournament and the course. A Tour staffer took us into restricted areas, including NBC and ShotLink trailers, where we learned the complexities of airing a live golf telecast and of simultaneously keeping tabs—down to the yard—on 156 players.

We toured the permanent media center, where I finally got to sit on the other side of the microphone. Imagining the seats full of



Tour Club members can watch shots on the 17th at TPC Sawgrass from a comfortable hospitality suite.





From above: Tour Club amenities include courses, properties and experiences from coast to coast, including Pelican Hill (Calif.), TPC Sugarloaf (Ga.), Pronghorn (Ore.), NBC truck at the Players (Fla.) and TPC Scottsdale (Ariz.).



interrogators, I decided that giving a press conference can't be as easy as many players make it look.

Walking through the main working area, I received a quizzical look from NBC's Jimmy Roberts, who said hello but clearly was wondering why I was loafing instead of working.

Later, we had lunch in the clubhouse, alongside VIPs and players. Those who had finished their rounds looked haggard, and the source of much of their stress was our final stop, the island green at the 17th hole. We watched all types of shots—near holes-in-one, balls that barely cleared the water, chunks—from the skybox overlooking both the 17th and 16th holes.

Watching golf certainly makes you want to play, so the weekend itinerary included tee times at the Ponte Vedra Inn, where we were staying, and Sawgrass Country Club, across the street from TPC Sawgrass.

Of all the amenities that the Tour Club offers, these tournament-based events are the most appealing, especially for corporate members who can entertain clients without the hassles of event management. (Club concierges make the arrangements.)

"The Tour Club can do it for cheaper than you could otherwise," says Vada O. Manager, a Phoenix-based consultant. A former Nike executive with plenty of insider experiences at events like the Super Bowl, Manager was very impressed by his first visit to the Players Championship, as seen through the Tour Club lens.

"Not only does membership give you access to a variety of venues, the club can provide unique experiences your average fan can't access."

That's the second hook; members can claim ultimate bragging rights in a golf culture operating on a currency of one-upmanship. During dinner at the Ponte Vedra Inn, Tour Club President John Fechter explains the appeal by recounting its first experience-based event. At the Northern Trust Open, several private-jet types were treated to behind-the-scenes tours, golf at top area clubs, and breakfast with the tournament's executive director, basketball legend Jerry West.

"But do you know what they liked most?" asks Fechter. "Because it was a tour-run event, we were able to get them special badges that allowed them to bring in their cellphones. That was one thing they had never done before."

"So the first thing they do is call up their buddies and say, 'You'll never guess where I'm calling from.'"

To be any more of an insider, you'd have to pass the PGA Tour's grueling Qualifying School.

