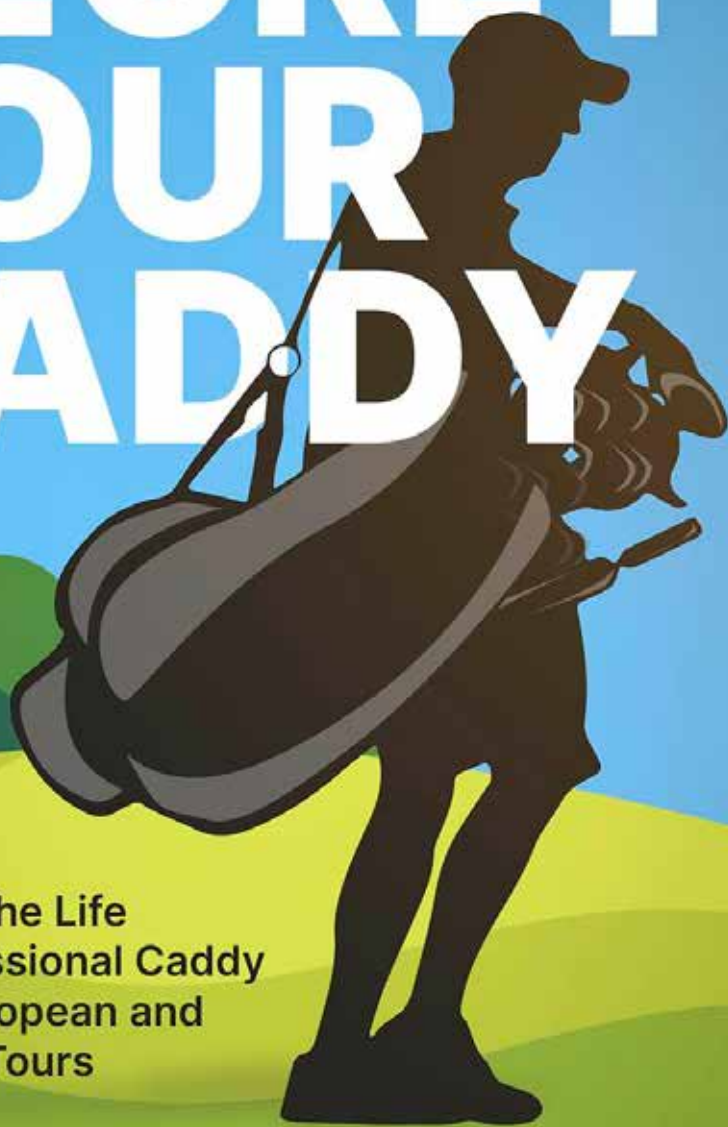


THE SECRET TOUR CADDY

A Year in the Life
of a Professional Caddy
on the European and
PGA Golf Tours



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Chapter 1

Africa Awaits

The Story of the Week of the Joburg Open 24–27 November 2022

This season the players had a choice as to where to play the first week back out: Joburg or Queensland. If it had been up to me, I'd have forgone the lure of £15 for a glass of wine and steak the size of a doormat in The Butcher's Shop restaurant in Joburg and instead opted for the 22-hour wallet-draining trip down to Australia, mainly on the basis that the two courses down there are just way better. Especially Kingston Heath, which is in my top three favourite courses in the world.

But my preferences count for jack shit, and even if they had, he chose Joburg anyway. Basically because we get to play three weeks in a row without any real travelling in between, and the third week is at Leopard Creek which is everyone's favourite stop on tour. That, and, I now find out, because he's bringing the family and current girlfriend down for that week as none of them have been there, and he's keen to show them what he keeps harping on about when he comes back from there every year.

So as usual at this time of year I'm back at Heathrow for the overnight flight down to Joburg to begin my love-hate relationship with South Africa for the 25th-odd time. I love it because it's a stunningly beautiful country, it's the cheapest

place in the world to get Falke socks which are THE best for caddying in, and the steak is out of this world.

And I hate it because, like it or not, you do need to be a wee bit careful down here. And after a few days, that can become slightly grating to say the least. For example, this week you definitely don't want to be staying anywhere more than a few hundred yards from Nelson Mandela Square in Sandton, which is where the players are staying and the transport to the golf course, complete with police escort, goes from. And even then it's best to be in a hotel that has a minibus service to and from it. One thing you don't do is take a leisurely walk back to the hotel after dinner: that is out of the question. Even though it's probably only a long par four away. And again, like it or not, there's crime because (at least) one generation was deprived of education and other basic human decencies, so poverty is rife. Witness the townships that we pass in our convoy up to the golf course each day.

Anyway, BA55 gets us into Joburg on time at 7am and we leg it off the plane to ensure we get past the Hong Kong flight that lands about the same time, as we know from experience that if we don't, then the queue at immigration could take hours. Which we do, so by 9ish we're through and already at the Houghton having a second breakfast. And as I've not been here before, this gives me a chance to walk the course before he gets there later on today, ready for a practice round tomorrow and the pro-am on Wednesday. Which I duly do, and discover it's decent, it's got tight grasses and fast slopey greens, making it pretty much like every other of the courses we play on in this neck of the woods. Scoring will therefore be low low low.

There are plenty of other guys doing the same as me, and as we can't check into the hotel until after 3pm, we take our time doing it. And we're joined along the way by guys we know who caddy predominantly on the Sunshine Tour. This is a big, important week for them if their normal player

is in the field (it's a co-sanctioned event with the DP World Tour) or if he's not, then it's important to get the bag of a DP World Tour player who's come down without their usual caddy. We, of course, tip off the guys we know as to who might be looking for a caddy so they can get work.

It's the least we can do. That and making sure we give them all the old balls this week, which is more than matched by the generosity of a lot of the players who bring down their old shirts and hats to give to these guys too. And never publicise it. It doesn't even matter that these guys are half the size of the guys giving them clothes. One local caddy famously asked his player if he could have some clothes at the end of the week, and his response to the question, 'What size are you?' or 'Your size, Sir,' is still trotted out every time we come down here.

It's super-hot by mid-morning Monday, especially for those of us who've come from the start of the English winter, which means that a thunderstorm isn't too far away. And looking at the forecast, that's going to be the pattern for the rest of the week too. And sure enough, a really meaty one heaves into view just as we've finished walking the course and also happens on the tournament days. Only, in that case, we were all still on the course, and had to leg it with bolts of lightning lighting up the sky just to the north, with play being abandoned for the day shortly afterwards leading to the first – but I'm guessing certainly not the last – rain delay of the season.

Rain delays can be a right pain if you're on the wrong side of the draw. Thankfully we weren't. And equally as thankfully, he makes the cut easy enough despite being a bit rusty, having not played a tournament since Mallorca at the back end of last season.

Someone who also hadn't played much was Dan Bradbury, basically because he hadn't even got a card. Not that that seemed to be much of an issue as rounds of 67, 66, 67, 67

saw him hold off Valimaki and a host of South Africans for a three-shot win. A win that also sees him into The Open at Hoylake in July and an exemption to the end of 2024. And a good few quid.

Valimaki's consolation for finishing second was that it gets him straight into The Open as well. His local South African caddy didn't need any consolation whatsoever. Because not only had he picked up the bag solely after we'd tipped him off it was going, but the healthy bonus he picked up from Valimaki paid for his wedding a few weeks later. On the back of him not being on the ill-fated Ethiopian Airlines Flight ET302² in March 2019 when he was supposed to be makes him still the most appropriately named human on earth: Lucky.

The silver lining of the threat of thunder never being too far away was that Sunday's U-draw meant everyone was finished by early afternoon, and so we made it across to Lanseria a good few hours earlier than we might have otherwise done. This left more time to eat more steak, as if we'd not eaten enough already in what is only week one of the trip down here.

Incidentally, a U-draw is where, usually due to the weather forecast being so poor that it threatens an on-time finish, the field is effectively split in half, with the top half of the field teeing off the 1st tee so the leaders go off last as they would normally, while the bottom half of the field tee off the 10th tee with the guys with the worst scores going off last. That way (for example) four hours of tee times magically become two hours, which gives wiggle room should any bad weather come early.

And with week two being the South African Open, one of the oldest golf championships in the world, on a course I've

2 ET302 crashed six minutes after take-off, killing all 157 people on board. Had Lucky been on the plane, it would have been 158.

never seen before, once steak time was over I was off to bed, earlier than some, because Monday of week two is now a work day with an early start. Or if you want to look at it another way: my eighth day in a row without a day off.

And that's not about to change anytime soon.

The Story of the Week of the Investec South African Open Championship 1–4 December 2022

At the end of the round on Sunday our routine is always the same. He exits the scoring tent (where the players sign their cards), I hand him his watch, wallet, phone and any clothes he might have had in the bag (e.g. the jumper that he wore because it was cold when we teed off); he heads for the Players' Lounge to feed and shower; I head to the locker room, empty his locker, pack the tour bag away in his travel bag, leave it somewhere where he can find it and then head for my own food and shower. After which it's time to either jump in a car with him or whatever transport is laid on to get us from the golf course to the airport.

The only thing that varies is the speed at which we do this. Some weeks you have literally minutes to get everything done before the car/bus that will get you to the airport just in time for the flight to wherever we're going next; whereas other weeks there's plenty of time so everything can be done at leisure. Last week at Houghton we were very firmly in this latter category given that there was a U-draw on Sunday.

So when we finished at Houghton there was definitely no rush to do anything; in fact, had we been in any way so inclined we could have done everything we needed to do and still had time to watch the conclusion of the tournament. Now I have no idea what he did, but not having a caddy mate 'up there' I jumped in the hire car with a couple of similarly minded colleagues and headed across to the other side of Joburg while it was (a) still dry; and (b) still daylight.

But every silver lining has its cloud. And this week's was that instead of Monday being effectively a day off where we could have travelled in the morning, found the hotel and then found somewhere to do some laundry, it ended up being a work day. Mainly because I suspect he had fuck all else to do. That and his roommate MCd (missed the cut) last week and wanted to play a couple of practice rounds this week: something which he'd already told me on Sunday afternoon.

So that meant my (increasingly tired) arse had to be dragged out of bed at another godforsaken hour, and plonked in an Uber down to the golf club (the other guys were going up to the course much later on so bagged the hire car) to try and get the course walked before his lazy arse was dragged out of its bed at a rather more sensible hour and plonked in a nice BMW courtesy car to meet me.

But on the bright side, at least it's always light and reasonably warm even at silly o'clock in a South African summer so getting up so early actually isn't too much of a chore. And, anyway, having a leisurely walk round is pretty much zero stress, plus the fact that I don't have to haul the clubs round, or listen to him bleating on about stuff from the previous week that he hasn't let go of yet while doing it. And that is, when you think about it, the silver lining to the cloud of the previous silver lining.

And added to that is also the prospect, assuming he sticks to Sunday's plan of a wee bit of Monday practice followed by nine holes, I could yet be back at the hotel in time for an afternoon snooze or, better still, an afternoon sleep, which, amazingly, I am, proving my theory that he was only up there because he couldn't think of anything better to do. And in that respect he's no different from 80 per cent of tour pros I've worked for.

But back to walking the course. We ventured out around 7am having first had to find where the yardage book guy was hiding. And the walk round was pretty useful given that I've

never been here before, and there are certainly a few holes where, because Joburg sits at 1,753m, or nearly 6,000ft, above sea level, the ball travels a lot further than it ordinarily does, so you do really have to factor this in when looking where, for example, you want tee shots to finish. It was a pretty long walk too, as at 8,300 yards the course is a monster, and that's without the bloody hills. There's a fair amount of water lurking too and lightning-fast greens, especially if you get above the hole on some of the holes coming in. Now granted it does play a lot shorter with the altitude and the heat, but by 11am Monday when we troop off the 18th, I can already confidently predict that it won't be a short hitter who wins round here this week.

Nor is it likely to be the week for anyone who doesn't like a good rain delay, and all the disruption that can cause. Because, as is always the case in Joburg, the threat of a thunderstorm is never far away, especially, as it turns out, this week with a particularly heavy one washing out most of one of the practice days (no complaints from any tour caddy on that one obviously), and several more across the tournament days, meaning it's pretty tight getting finished even with a U-draw and a two-tee start in three-balls on both Saturday and Sunday.

But even with the length of the course and it playing even longer due to the wet fairways, eight under leads after the first round, with the cut (which came on Saturday morning due to the adverse weather) falling at three under – which frankly shows how good these guys are. And remember that, despite being the oldest national golf championship in the world, the field isn't exactly the best the event has ever seen, which, not for the last time this season, shows how good anyone who calls themselves a tour pro actually is.

Not that that bothers Thriston Lawrence one little bit. It's his eight under that leads at the end of the first round. He's still leading at the end of Round 2. And at the end

of Round 3. And despite surviving a five over on the last seven mini-meltdown on Sunday afternoon, his name is still on top of the leaderboard after 72 holes for his third win in a year.

My man has another half-decent week given that we both know his game isn't quite where it needs to be to contend and, frankly, both our eyes have been on next week since making the cut. And that's because we know tomorrow morning we'll be jumping straight in the hire car and heading up to everyone's favourite destination: Leopard Creek Country Club.

Where no one minds working on a Monday.

The Story of the Week of the Alfred Dunhill Championship 8–11 December 2022

There's nowhere on this earth where you can theoretically see all of the Big Five³ on your way to work. Except when work is at Leopard Creek. And there's also nowhere on this earth where you can definitely bribe a policeman on your way to work, and still get there. Except when work is at Leopard Creek. Or to give it its proper name, Leopard Creek Country Club: a piece of golfing heaven on the edge of the piece of safari and wildlife heaven that is the Kruger National Park.

And while we're actually here for the Alfred Dunhill Championship, a lot of guys come here as much for the opportunity to go on safari in the park every day as for the opportunity to play in the tournament itself. Indeed, there's a healthy majority who see way more of the Kruger Park than they do of the practice facilities, even though they are out of this world, and sat alongside is a par-three course where every hole is a replica of a great par three from somewhere in the world. This is in itself a joy to play, never mind the main course. They even used to televise the two par-three tournaments that everyone playing in the tournament plays

3 The Big Five being lions, leopards, rhinos, elephants and buffalo.

in on either the Tuesday or the Wednesday before things get properly underway on the Thursday morning.

Before any of that, though, we jump in a hire car early Monday morning for the five-hour drive up to Malelane from Joburg, or more precisely from the Emperors Palace casino just round from the airport where virtually every tour caddy who ever comes down here stays on a Sunday night: a ridiculously opulent place for a ridiculously small price. Albeit before you factor in the rest of the night eating steak, going to Hooters and gambling in the casino.

Amazingly we manage to get to Malelane without getting stopped by the police, which in all the years I've been coming down here is something of a rarity. Not that we've ever been doing anything wrong when we've been stopped by the police in previous years, apart from being a foreigner driving a hire car below the speed limit the week before Christmas which, although not strictly a crime in itself, is an opportunity for the local cops to stop you, fine you for some made-up traffic offence and then pocket the money. They know they're doing it and so do we.

One colleague even said, 'Look, Officer, will 500 rand make this problem go away?' when he got stopped this year – admittedly for the second time in 15km and frustrations were running high. Only in South Africa could the answer be 'Yes.' So money changed hands, he got a big smile off the crooked cop and within two minutes was on his way again, safe in the knowledge that he'd have got the same 'Yes' in Europe only because it would have been replaced by a rather more serious one of trying to bribe a policeman.

Every time we come this way we know to hide any cash, apart from say 1,000 rand (about €50) somewhere the police won't find it (underpants were always my favourite), and ask to pay at the police station at Malelane because 'we've just come from the airport and have no cash on us'. To this day none of us have ever been there, and somewhere there's a landfill with

about 2,000 tour caddy traffic offence tickets in it, around 15 of them mine. After all, this is Africa.

In fact the only place we really go in Malelane is the Duck and Dive pub off the main crossroads; well, there and the B&B we're booked into overlooking the Crocodile River. The former allows us to (oddly enough) eat steak for not very much money, proper game steaks like kudu or wildebeest for not very much more, and play darts against the locals every night; while the latter allows us to watch elephants wandering up and down the river each evening literally a soft wedge away from the observation deck.

You also get to see these magnificent beasts from the 13th green on the golf course itself, located high above the same Crocodile River, affording you views right across the Kruger Park itself. And it's here that everyone takes a million photos every year, and uses the laser to see if they can spot anything else of note lurking in the shade of the trees once the sun gets up.

And get up it does, because this can be the hottest place we caddy on tour all year. In fact it's not unheard of for the temperature to nudge well into the 40s in the afternoon. And with often very little wind, just carrying the bag is physically very demanding even with soaking-wet cold towels round your neck to try and keep cool, and guzzling litre after litre of water on the way round. Without needing to pee.

Not that it's particularly wise to pop into the bush off the fairways for a pee anyway: after all, we are on the edge of a game reserve the size of Wales, and you never know what's out there. But at least the two giraffes who wandered out of the bush, walked up to the ropes, took a good look left and right, before deciding golf wasn't their thing and wandering back again the other year probably won't eat you. You might not be so lucky with some of their fellow bush dwellers.

What you are getting, though, at Leopard Creek is lots of birdie opportunities, especially on the back nine. Case in

point being South African Merrick Bremner, who had seven threes on the back nine on Friday to be home in six under 30 to make the cut on the number.

And with players taking the back nine to pieces over the weekend as well, it was ultimately Ockie Strydom taking his first tour win come Sunday afternoon, winning by two from Otaegui with Laurie Canter one shot further back. Whether they'll ever play here again depends on what happens with the ongoing LIV v DP World Tour shenanigans, although it's very, very hard to see Mr Rupert (who bankrolls the tournament and owns the entire place) not being able to invite the likes of Louis Oosthuizen and Charl Schwartzel next year. But time will tell on that one.

Anyway, by the time Strydom was holing the winning putt, we were all three hours deep into a safari in the Kruger, meaning by the time we got out of the park and on the road back to Joburg for another cultural evening in the Emperors Palace, all the crooked cops had gone home, so we made it a round trip without needing to bribe a single policeman.

Christmas had indeed come early.

Happy Mondays

Three tournaments into my year and I'm definitely straight back in the tour caddy work routine of walk round, practice round(s), pro-am round, followed by the tournament rounds. Just in time to get out of it over Christmas.

This makes now a good time to look at this routine, specifically the bit where we leave one venue on a Sunday afternoon and get to the next one on a Monday. No prizes for guessing that first up it's travelling. Some weeks, like between weeks one and two on this trip, it's really easy; some weeks it involves a slightly longer journey, like last week's drive from Joburg to Malelane; and some weeks it involves planes and time changes. Some weeks you have plenty of time; some weeks it's a mad dash to make the

flight to make the other flight to make the other flight to next week's venue two continents away. Some weeks everything goes smoothly; other weeks it manifestly does not. And from my experience it's best to expect the latter, and be pleasantly surprised when it's the former. That, and not being dumb as a stump because, if you are, travelling can become a nightmare and something you might end up doing on your own, as your colleagues conclude you're a jinx and avoid you like the plague.

But whether that week's travel has gone well or catastrophically badly, eventually we all end up getting to where we need to be. Along, hopefully, with our luggage. But not always. Either way the first thing everyone asks on arrival at the golf course is 'Where's Dion?'

Dion is Dion Stevens, owner of Dion Stevens International (DSI), who makes the yardage books we use out here. And has been doing so for over 15 years now. He might be an Aussie; he might be permanently harassed; and he might be occasionally 'grumpy', but his yardage books are the finest anywhere in the world.

And his yardage book is THE tool of our trade. In fact, while it might be heresy to even say it, there is definitely an argument that while you could have a professional golf tournament without caddies, you couldn't have one without yardage books. So once you do find him, you just pick up whatever combination of his yardage books you've ordered that week, and your week can properly start. My yardage book goes straight in my back pocket the minute I pick it up, and from that point on it's rarely out of my sight all week. My player's yardage book (most players carry their own in the modern era) then goes into his locker in the locker room, and therefore becomes his responsibility, not mine.

Then it's time to go 'walk the course': ideally before your player arrives. If you've been there before, you'll remember every hole (tour caddies have this innate ability to tell you

about every hole on every course they've caddied on) and are really just checking for any obvious changes. But if you've not been there before, walking the course will take a wee while longer.

We start on every hole by looking at the line we'll take off the tee. This is based on the carry over any hazards, how far any run-outs are on that hole and the target landing area (which might mean you re-evaluate your initial thoughts). And then it's on to the green to look, fairly obviously, at where the main slopes are, how severe they are, whether or not there are potential back-stops to certain pin positions, where the likely pin positions will be, and where the best and worst misses are to these.

Ideally it's not raining when you 'walk the course'. If it is, your 'Happy Monday' might just become an 'I don't like Mondays' Monday. Very few things in life are worse. Because done properly, walking the course can take a good few hours. Especially if you're one of those caddies who likes to have every single possible number that could ever conceivably be required.

But at some stage you're done. And it's off to the Caddy Lounge to see what's in store food-wise this week. Some weeks it's exceptional, restaurant-class in fact; some weeks it's decent, and some weeks not so decent. Thankfully there's not many of the latter weeks these days. And there's also not many jobs in the world where you get a free breakfast and lunch every day.

By this time in Europe, the 'bag run' should have arrived from the previous week's venue. This is the truck that transports the players' travel bags containing their clubs from one venue to another, so sparing them from the ball-ache of having to manhandle these things through airports and pay handsomely for the privilege of putting them on a plane. And typically it's your job as a tour caddy to locate this bag, unpack its contents, stick the bag in the bag store at the golf

club (tour players rarely take their clubs 'home' with them at night) and sort out his locker.

Next stop: the truck. The various giant tour trucks are where you go to pick up your player's balls and gloves for the week: generally three-dozen balls and four new gloves. And while you're there you'll pick up any new shoes, clothes, etc. that they might have ordered, as well as dropping off any clubs that need 'tweaking' or checking after the previous week (each truck has a workshop fitted out with every tool imaginable as well as hundreds of thousands of €s worth of shafts, iron and driver heads, apparel and so on).

If your player isn't arriving until that night or Tuesday morning first thing ... and it's not been raining ... you'll have had a stress-free Happy Monday and nothing else to do, and so it's time to go back to the hotel and unwind. Making Monday nights the best nights to unwind. If unwinding is your thing.

Otherwise it's time to meet up with your player for some range time followed, sometimes, by nine holes. The thing that stops this meaning that Monday is an 'I don't like Mondays' Monday is that this MAY mean that tomorrow you'll only do the other nine holes rather than 18 stuck behind those guys who are playing a match and taking forever like the guys who've just had a Happy Mondays Monday.

Every cloud.