

THE FANTASY GOLF CAMP

AT ANGEL PARK IN LAS VEGAS.

PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE ELLIS KONIK

A DUFFER'S DREAM

FANTASY GOLF CAMP AT CAESARS PALACE IN LAS VEGAS
PAIRS AMATEURS WITH TOP PGA TOUR PLAYERS

by Michael Konik

The game of golf has been good to Tom Kite. Forget the many millions he's earned in endorsements for clubs and balls and automobiles; forget the five-figure fees he commands for corporate outings; forget all the extras. In official PGA prize money alone, Tom Kite has won more than \$9 million playing golf tournaments. More than Arnold Palmer, more than Jack Nicklaus, more than Greg Norman. Tom Kite is the sport's all-time leading money winner.

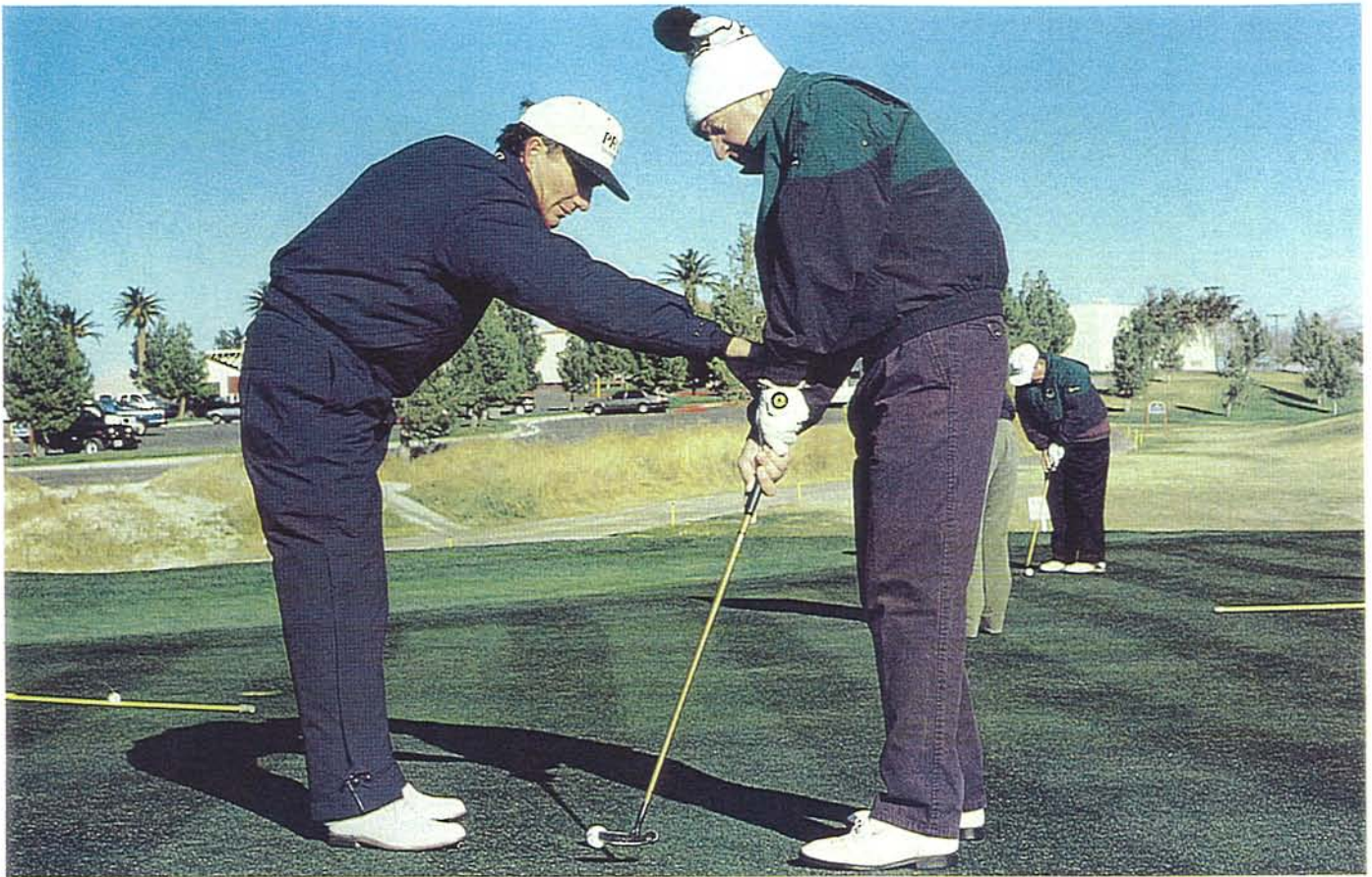
This is not a man who has to do anything he doesn't really want to do.

Yet on Las Vegas's Angel Park links on a freezing cold day in November—it's *snowing* for goodness sake—Tom Kite is climbing into a rocky ravine to poke around a clump of desert cacti with his pitching wedge in search of an amateur's ball.

Earlier in the day he could be seen down on one knee, teeing up Titleists for hackers on the practice range. At an evening cocktail party he could be heard swapping personal stories with dozens of awestruck admirers he had never seen before. And one day, when the weather became too inclement for golf, even for fanatic all-time leading money winners, Kite was spotted on the floor of a hotel ballroom rolling out Astroturf mats and administering putting lessons.

"That's what this week is all about," Kite says, smiling broadly. "I'm here to help. The campers are the stars."

The "week" is called Fantasy Golf Camp, where sod-diggers of comparatively little skill get to play, mingle and carouse with the game's greatest practitioners. Back home you may be a sorry slicer who seldom sees the short grass on a fairway, but when you play a "scramble"



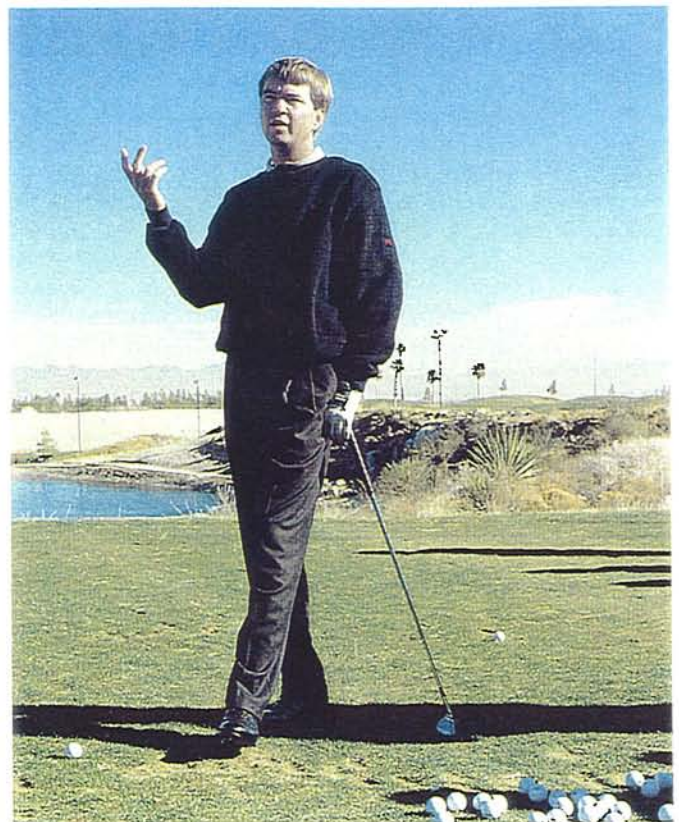
tournament at Fantasy Golf Camp you might be teamed with Ryder Cup Captain Lanny Wadkins, and he tends to keep his tee-shots in the fairway. You may be a hopeless hooker with a double-bogey average, but when you play a round of "best ball" at Fantasy Golf Camp your partner could be two-time U.S. Open Champion Curtis Strange, and he tends to make a birdie every now and then. And although you may have never in your life reached a par five in two, at Fantasy Golf Camp you might be paired with National Long Drive Champion Art Sellinger. Welcome to the world of eagle putts.

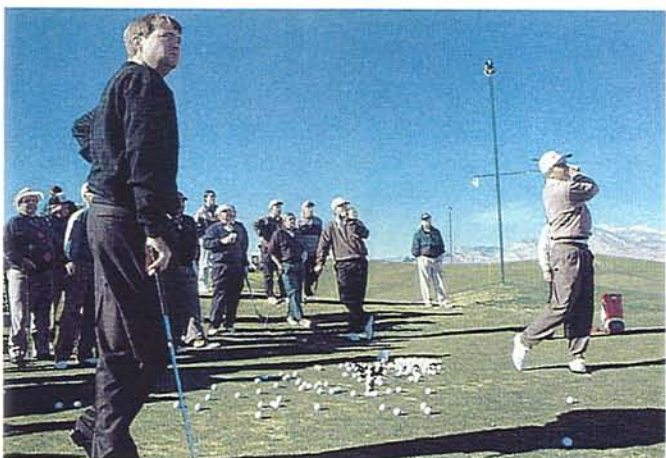
Fantasy Golf Camp is the culmination of a yearlong promotion you may have seen conducted at your local country club or municipal course called the Fantasy Golf Challenge. It's the hacker's equivalent of "all you need is a dollar and a dream." Each year thousands of golfers pony up a modest entry fee—between \$10 and \$100—to play in regional Challenge tournaments. This small investment pays remarkable dividends: the winners, be they scratch semipro or high-handicap duffers, are flown to Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, where, when not drinking, gambling and smoking good cigars, they play golf at Angel Park with PGA Tour professionals. And have guys like Tom Kite help them find lost balls.

Does life get any sweeter?

If you are not fortunate enough to win a spot at Fantasy Golf Camp, you can buy your way in. One payment gets you everything: transportation, lodging, meals, gifts and golf with the greats. Officially, the price for 1995 remains undisclosed; but in 1993 it

GARY KOCH HELPS A CAMPER PERFECT HIS STROKE, ABOVE; THREE-TIME WORLD CUP CHAMPION DAVIS LOVE GIVES TIPS ON THE GAME, BELOW.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: PGA-PRIZE-MONEY LEADER TOM KITE HELPS A GOLFER WITH HIS SWING; CURTIS STRANGE (ON THE GROUND), LANNY WADKINS AND THE CAMPERS WATCH THE DEMONSTRATIONS FROM THE SIDELINES; DAVIS LOVE INSTRUCTS SOME GOLFERS; MIKE CARRICK HELPS A CAMPER IN THE ROUGH; LOVE WATCHES STRANGE DEMONSTRATE A SHOT FOR THE CAMPERS; PROS AND CAMPERS ALIKE WAIT TO JUDGE THE SHOTS; KITE ASSISTS A CAMPER WITH HIS GRIP.

was said to have been \$25,000. (Note: It's time to start working on your short game.)

Though "getting there is half the fun" may apply to most pursuits, at Fantasy Golf Camp, being there is all the fun. Pros, Incorporated, the Virginia-based agency that manages some of the biggest names in golf, coordinates the camp's activities and supplies the marquee talent; the talent supplies the memories. If you want to shave strokes off your handicap overnight, you can get an intensive analysis from renowned *Golf Digest* instructor Scott Davenport. When you need a quickie long-iron lesson, PGA Tour pros like Curt Byrum, Steve Pate and Peter Persons are at your service. And when you want the latest scuttlebutt on the World Tour controversy, ESPN commentators Robert Wrenn and Gary Koch are candid confidants.

If you merely want to ogle your heroes from a thrillingly intimate perspective, there's plenty of opportunity for that, too. Unlike the typical pro-am event, where the pros are fulfilling a contractual obligation to the tournament sponsor, at Fantasy Golf Camp stars like Kite and Strange and Peter Jacobsen don't merely say hello at the first tee and good-bye on the 18th green, they're your pals. They slap you high fives. They help read the break on your putts. They tell you dirty jokes.

Fantasy Golf Camp is very much like your normal weekend outing with a foursome of friendly companions. Except here the odds of one of your foursome being among the top 200 players on Earth are a lot better.

This proximity to star power can be unnerving. For most of the male hackers in attendance, standing on the tee-box with visiting camp celebrity Jane Seymour, television's beautiful Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman, induces less heart-quickenning anxiety than having Davis Love watch them hit a drive. It's not that Love, three-time World Cup Champion, is critical; on the contrary, he's among the nicest superstars you'll ever meet. But in addition to being one of the PGA's leading cigar aficionados, he is also one of the longest hitters on the tour, right up there with John Daly. Having Davis Love inspect your tee-shot is like having Michael Jordan supervise your jump shot. Guys who normally bring their home course to its knees can easily be reduced to dirt-digging chunkmeisters when Love—or Wadkins, or Strange, or any divine swinger—is standing nearby.



A GOLF BALL-STUFFED PETER JACOBSEN KEEPS THE CAMPERS LAUGHING ABOUT THEIR GOLF GAME, ABOVE. ART SELLINGER MAKES A POINT, BELOW.



Which raises an obvious question: Isn't Fantasy Golf Camp depressing? Doesn't the vast gulf between muddler and master reinforce the futility of the duffer's quest to play the maddening game somewhat respectably? No. Based on the abundance of belly laughs, smiles and mesmerized stares coming from the campers, Fantasy Golfers are content simply to admire the sublime beauty of a Davis Love drive, or a Tom Kite wedge, or a Lanny Wadkins 3-iron.

"Spend a few hours with these pros and you see they're just regular guys," says Brendan Murphy, an affable Canadian who dropped

from a 27 to a 14 handicap after last year's camp. "I think the pros are having as much fun as the amateurs."

Indeed, after Robert Wrenn gives one high-handicap camper a valuable swing tip, converting a wicked slice into a soaring missile, it is hard to tell who is more pleased with the result, student or teacher. "That's looking awful good," Wrenn tells the camper. "You better start getting ready for the Senior Tour."

When the pros aren't instructing or inspiring, they're entertaining. During Fantasy Golf Camp's putting contest, conducted on Angel Park's superb 18-hole miniature course, Wrenn lets loose a litany of on-the-green phrases you never hear him utter on ESPN. To a ball speeding past the cup: "Grow a beard!" To a ball reluctant to fall into the hole: "C'mon, ball, don't be afraid of the dark!"

Peter Jacobsen, known on the tour for his sense of humor, delivers his "impressions" of famous golfers, including Severiano Ballesteros, Player and "the walrus," Craig Stadler. Even the exaggerated upright follow-through of a certain leading money winner is fair game in Jacobsen's act—and the campers love every second of it.

Art Sellinger's routine, which he performs around the world for thousands of astounded spectators, leaves most of the campers shaking their head in wonderment. Sellinger hits a golf ball farther—and in more different ways—than anyone you've ever seen. As part of his Fantasy Golf exhibition, he "warms up" by poking a few 9-irons about 190 yards. Then, unbelievably, he hits his *putter* more than 250 yards. He leaves a new ball in its sleeve, *inside its box* and drives it close to 275 yards. Seated on a chair, he hits a ball more than 200 yards. And after blasting a tee-shot through a piece of plywood, hitting a ball off a three-foot-tall tee and swatting *rolling* balls into the stratosphere, Sellinger gets down to the serious business of long-distance driving.

"How far did that shot go?" one camper asks Gary Koch, after Sellinger unleashes a mighty wallop.

"I'd love to tell you," Koch says, peering into the distance. "But I can't see that far."

"It has nothing to do with strength. I can't bench-press more than 150 pounds," Sellinger tells his audience. "One day you'll hit it that far, too." He pauses for effect. "I mean, this is a fantasy camp, right?"

After three or four days of fraternization, most of the campers feel comfortable enough to stop being amazed with the pros and start being chums. Whether hitting the Vegas gaming tables together or sharing an evening meal, the campers take great pleasure in merely being around the greats, basking in their aura, hoping perhaps to capture some of their ability through osmosis. Eventually, near the end of the week, some campers have achieved the ultimate level of familiarity: the ability to needle one of the world's greatest golfers when he hits a less-than-great golf shot.



CAMPERS FOLLOW THE PROS' ADVICE ON AN INDOOR CHIPPING RANGE, ABOVE. PETER PERSONS AND A HAPPY CAMPER BET ON THE INDOOR CHIPPING, BELOW.

"Hey, Peter," a camper yells to Jacobsen on Angel Park's 14th green. "You left that putt way short. What's the matter, you trip on your skirt?"

"No," Jacobsen replies, rubbing the blade of his putter on his sleeve. "Just gotta wipe the mascara off this thing."

When Kite pulls his approach shot to the 6th far left of the flag, a member of his team says, "It's OK, Tom. I guess you were shooting for the Sunday pin placement."

