

A YEAR IN GOLF: TALES FROM THE TOUR

CONNECTICUT: Jim Mahoney parted with a tiny piece of US Open history with hopes it could change Phil Mickelson's luck. It was a broken tee in a plastic bag. "A souvenir that money can't buy," Mahoney said in a telephone interview from his home in Connecticut.

Mahoney brought the tee to the Deutsche Bank Championship, along with a letter explaining the circumstances around it. This was the last tee Mickelson used at Winged Foot in the 2006 U.S. Open. His drive sailed far to the left on the 18th hole, like so many of his tee shots that Sunday, and caromed off a tent. From

and his friend walked across the teeing ground.

"We're the only ones there. The marshals gave up," he said. "They were the last group to hit. And there's Phil's tee." Even after it was over, Mahoney's said his friends told him he should put the tee on a plaque. Instead, he stored it in a drawer. He wanted Mickelson to win that day, as did half of New York. He roots for him at every major.

And that's why he thought it might help to give it back. Mahoney approached Mickelson's caddie during the pro-am at the Deutsche Bank Championship in

radio, Golf Channel, another radio station, the writers and then the PGA Tour's website.

A large crowd behind a gated section began calling out to him as McIlroy walked away, wanting his autograph. McIlroy looked at the crowd, then at the clubhouse.

That's when his caddie, J.P. Fitzpatrick, stepped in. "Those kids over there have followed you all day," he told McIlroy. "You need to sign for them." McIlroy reached for the pen in his back pocket, walked over to the kids and spent the next 15 minutes with them.

Monday at the PGA Championship was a time to get registered, maybe hit a few putts but otherwise take it easy during the busiest stretch of the year. Matt Kuchar intended to do just that, and he pulled up a chair at a patio table to join Jim "Bones" MacKay, the caddie for Phil Mickelson.

MacKay pointed out that Kuchar was sitting in a famous chair. OK, it wasn't the same chair. But it's where Rocco Mediate was sitting at Valhalla during the 2000 PGA Championship. Mediate was close to qualifying for the Presidents Cup that year. The chair broke suddenly and Mediate injured an already tender back. He withdrew from the final major. He didn't make the Presidents Cup team.

That was before Kuchar joined the PGA Tour. He had never heard the story. Kuchar was running errands that afternoon when he was stuck in traffic so long that he wound up with a sore back. Three days later, he withdrew from the PGA at Valhalla. Beware the chair.

Jordan Spieth describes her as the girl who keeps the family grounded, and the funniest member of the Spieth clan. That would be Ellie, his 14-year-old sister who was born with neurological challenges. And she was part of the entourage at the Deutsche Bank Championship, watching big brother Jordan on the golf course while walking with her other brother, Steven, who plays basketball at Brown. She was talking to anyone who would listen about her big brothers and what they do.

The gallery was held back behind the seventh green while players and their caddies got on carts to take them to the next tee. Spieth spotted his little sister and waved her over. Ellie ran to the cart and sat on her big brother's lap as they drove off. She looked like the happiest person at TPC Boston. And so did Spieth. British humor has no rival in golf.

At the annual caddie awards dinner at the HSBC Champions, a slide show presenting the year in golf was on the screen. Bubba Watson won the Masters. Martin Kaymer won the U.S. Open. Andrew Cotter of the BBC was the host for the dinner, and according to several caddies in attendance, Cotter mentioned how it wasn't long before one player took over the world of golf by winning two majors. The dramatic commentary was accompanied by the next photo - Colin Montgomerie.

On Monday after the AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am, the course was filled with a few corporate partners and several members of the CBS Sports crew, mainly the staff that never gets attention or publicity for the invaluable work on the broadcast.

Jim Nantz treated this Monday like any other. He lives not far from the 18th green. His wife, Courtney, was in the final months of her pregnancy. Every morning, they take as beautiful a walk as there is in golf along the coast at Pebble Beach to the par-3 seventh green, where they were married.

This walk took longer than usual. Each time Nantz passed a group from the CBS crew, they wanted to hear his commentary on their shots. Nantz delivered, as he often does.

Patrick Rodgers of Stanford was honored at the Memorial with the Jack Nicklaus Award as college player of the year. That included a trip to Muirfield Village and a presentation hosted by Nicklaus.

That was memorable on its own. Typical of Nicklaus, he stayed around after the presentation to talk with Rodgers and the rest of the winners from the various divisions. Looking at Rodgers right in the eye, Nicklaus said, "You ever need anything at all, just call me." Nicklaus didn't break the eye contact until Rodgers nodded back.—AP



WINGED FOOT: This photo taken on Aug. 29, 2014 shows a tee used by golfer Phil Mickelson for his last tee shot at 2006 US Open golf tournament at Winged Foot. Jim Mahoney, who collected the souvenir tee in 2006, approached Mickelson's caddie during the pro-am at the Deutsche Bank Championship in September. He simply handed him an envelope that contained the broken tee and the letter.—AP

there, Lefty made double bogey and finished one shot behind.

The U.S. Open remains the only major keeping him from the career Grand Slam. Winged Foot haunts him more than his other five runner-up finishes. "I was on the tee at Winged Foot, me and a friend of mine," Mahoney said. "Phil got out his driver and was bouncing the ball off the face. Phil looked over to the 17th green and there's a scoreboard. It showed that (Colin) Montgomerie had just double bogeyed the 18th. His whole demeanor changed. But he hits this horrendous slice."

Thousands of fans who had crowded around the tee box took off down the sides of the fairway. Mahoney

September. He simply handed him an envelope that contained the broken tee and the letter.

"I will trade the tee for a photo-op," said the letter, addressed to Mickelson and Jim "Bones" MacKay. "You can make peace with it and win the Open in 2015. Good luck." MacKay was looking for Mahoney after the round for the photo. He never found him.

Moments like these give tournament golf its texture, stories that go beyond numbers on a scorecard and trophies on a mantle. Here are more from this year's collection of "Tales from the Tour."

Rory McIlroy had a long day at The Players Championship, and it wasn't over when he signed his card. There was an interview with Sky Sports, PGA Tour

PANATHINAIKOS, GALATASARAY MAKE WINNING STARTS

BELGRADE: Six-time Euroleague winners Panathinaikos started the competition's second group stage with an 83-76 home win over holders Maccabi Tel Aviv while Galatasaray beat Zalgiris Kaunas 78-69 in an empty arena on Tuesday.

The first round of the Top 16, featuring two groups of eight teams, continues on Friday when Red Star Belgrade entertain Real Madrid in the match of the week and Fenerbahce are at home to CSKA Moscow in the other outstanding fixture.

Maccabi made a brighter start in Athens and seemed to be in control after carving out a 35-22 lead in the latter stages of the first half, with the home side unable to counter their fast breaks, which resulted in a barrage of spectacular slam dunks.

But Panathinaikos stormed back after their Montenegrin coach Dusko Ivanovic threw 34-year old playmaker Dimitris Diamantidis into the fray, blunting Maccabi's offence in the fourth quarter.

"We were patient and played better defence in the second half to beat a very good Maccabi side," a delighted Ivanovic told Euroleague television.

Uruguayan centre Esteban Batista led the Greek outfit with 16 points, Americans James Gist and AJ Slaughter added 15 apiece and Diamantidis finished with 11 and seven assists.

Brian Randle and Nate Linhart netted 18 points each for Maccabi and their athletic centre Alex Tyus also stood out with 14 and 11 rebounds.

Galatasaray also overturned a first-half deficit in a match played behind closed doors with the Turkish side serving a three-game crowd ban after fan violence led to the death of a Red Star Belgrade supporter before their match in November.

Against Zalgiris, playmaker Sinan Guler and Serbian forward Zoran Erceg scored 14 points each for Galatasaray, former NBA guard Carlos Arroyo added 12 and centre Kerem Gonlum chipped in with 10 and six rebounds in a fluid team effort.—Reuters



TURKEY: Zalgiris Kaunas' Lithuanian center Robertas Javtokas (right) vies for the ball with Galatasaray's Serbian center Zoran Erceg (LEFT) during a Euroleague Top 16 basketball match. AFP

AGE OLD PROBLEMS LEAVE ASIAN CUP AN OPEN RACE

SINGAPORE: The Asian Cup heads to Australia for the first time next month with the scars of a woe-filled 2014 World Cup for the continent and the recurring problems of match-fixing and swift sackings leaving the tournament wide open.

Holders Japan are favorites to win a record extending fifth continental title but dark clouds hang over their coach Javier Aguirre after he became embroiled in a Spanish match-fixing case dating back to his time as Real Zaragoza boss.

The Mexican has long denied any wrongdoing but the negative attention has not helped confidence in Japan, where a mixed start and the exclusion of form players, like Gamba Osaka forward Takashi Usami, have raised questions about his suitability.

The pressure on Aguirre, though, is nothing like what Ange Postecoglou is under as the hosts welcome Asia's biggest tournament for the first time since joining the confederation in 2006.

Australia, runners up to Japan in 2011, won only one match in 2014, a friendly triumph over Saudi Arabia in September, with defensive lapses in the young side a glaring issue as the coach struggles to replace a golden generation which qualified for three consecutive World Cups.

"Things haven't been going well prior to this tournament, we have to be brutally honest. We've probably gone a little bit backwards," former Australia goalkeeper Mark Bosnich told Reuters.

Postecoglou was in charge for the predictable three World Cup defeats in Brazil, where the Socceroos, Japan, Iran and South Korea all finished bottom of their groups as Asia failed to earn a single victory for the first time since 1990. He kept his job with the Asian showpiece in mind but a failure on home soil is sure to spell the end of his tenure.

MANAGERIAL CHANGES

His task is not helped by a tough Group A including a showdown against South Korea, who are now under the guidance of German Uli Stielike, one of 11 coaches appointed by the 16 finalists last year as flagging teams eyed a fresh start.

Bahrain and Jordan have gone through a combined six managers since last year, while Saudi Arabia and Iraq have loaned coaches from club sides for the Jan. 9-31 tournament in a glaring example of the short-sightedness in the region's administrations.

"The coach doesn't have time to impose his style on the team and quite often he will have very little input into selecting the squad," former Australia boss Pim Verbeek said of the constant chopping and changing. Carlos Queiroz is the longest serving boss in the tournament but a lack of adequate warm-up matches leave his defensive Iran side short of quality action as they seek an attacking dimension in order to lift a fourth Asian Cup.

While they look forward to a 13th Asian Cup, Palestine are taking part in their first after overcoming a raft of player access issues to qualify by winning the Challenge Cup for emerging nations.

The West Asians will do well to get anything from two former winners Iraq and Japan in Group D, with Uzbekistan, UAE and Qatar more likely to be tournament dark horses.—Reuters