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A Break in the Clouds: Matt Bettencourt's Patience Has Paid Off As He Prepares for His First U.S. Open

June 14, 2009

By Bob Gillespie, The State, Columbia, S.C.

Jun. 14--When you're young and in love, you learn to laugh your way through life's good times and bad.

Or is that the bad and the good?

This week, Matt and Kelly Bettencourt of Duncan are laughing all the way to the U.S. Open Championship. It is the adventure of a lifetime for the newlyweds -- well, it has that potential, but topping the adventures, and misadventures, they have already experienced might take some doing.

From their meeting in a Greenville restaurant five years ago -- the Southern girl and the California guy, in town for a Nationwide Tour event -- to their wedding in March, when Matt became violently ill from a stomach virus --

during the reception -- to the theft of his golf clubs and wedding ring in Dallas, the PGA Tour rookie and his bride have built up a stockpile of stories to tell the grandkids one day.

Chances are they will have the youngsters rolling on the floor.

"It's like when Matt's clubs were stolen," Kelly said, "and I said, 'This is us; this always happens.' You just keep laughing and move on.

"Yeah, he got sick, but we still got married. And he had the kidney stones but was still able to win. We never let it get to us."

What's that about kidney stones? And what about the towed courtesy car at Hilton Head in April?

Be patient, folks. The couple will tell all.

Matt Bettencourt, in fact, could preach on the topic of patience all day. His whole life, and especially his golf career, has been about surviving blows and waiting for the payoff.

Take his string of failures before the success of 2008-09; his years on the Canadian and Nationwide tours, wondering if he ought to quit golf and go back to selling shower doors for a glass company in California. Had he done that, where would he be now?

Probably not married and living in South Carolina. "It's slow-paced, no traffic, the people are nice," he said, comparing Duncan to California. "It's peaceful. I love it, love the Southern hospitality."

And certainly not spending this week at Bethpage Black on Long Island, where today he will play a practice round with Rocco Mediate, the feel-good runner-up to Tiger Woods at last year's Open and probably Bettencourt's closest friend on the PGA Tour.

As for last week, when Bettencourt shared the lead at Jack Nicklaus' Memorial Tournament before a final-round 75 gave him a tie for fifth -- his best 2009 finish and worth \$219,000 -- well, that goes back to having patience.

"That's part of being a professional -- (being able to have) amnesia," he said. "You forget about (final-round disappointment), move on to a new tournament. That's what separates the best from everyone else."

Less than 24 hours later, Bettencourt shot 71-64 at the Columbus, Ohio, Open qualifier and punched his ticket for this week. Just another case of how the 34-year-old seems to keep turning lemons into lemonade.

FROM BASEBALL TO GOLF

Bettencourt once dreamed of a big league baseball career. He was a top high school pitcher, attracting several scholarship offers, but a shoulder injury his senior season -- "too many curveballs," he said -- ended his baseball prospects.

That left his other sport: golf. "I'd always been good at it," learning the game at age 6 and even playing in the U.S. Junior, he said, "but I liked the team aspect of baseball, and I was better at it growing up." After the injury left him without a choice, he played golf and got a degree from Modesto Junior College, spent time at Division III Stanislaus State (but did not play golf) and then went to work.

And he played amateur golf -- a lot of it, and played well. He was Northern California's top amateur in 2001 and '02. At 27, "I thought, I'm going to give (professional golf) a shot," and he headed to qualifying school, where he reached the second stage.

"I thought I'd get my (PGA Tour) card and go right out on tour," he said, laughing. Instead, he spent 2003-06 bouncing among developmental tours.



In 2004, while playing 26 Nationwide Tour events, making seven cuts, he landed in Greenville for the BMW Charity Pro-Am. He and his caddie were at Soby's, a popular downtown restaurant, and as they headed for the door, Jessica Alissi invited them to join her and a friend -- Kelly Rush -- at their table.

"I had seen them earlier, and I told (Alissi), 'There's the two guys I was talking about,'" Kelly said, laughing. "So she hit on them." Alissi would wind up as the couple's maid of honor.

Raised in Georgia and South Carolina, Kelly, then a pharmaceutical representative, was taken with the "cute guy" from California. "And I think he liked (that) I was a Southern girl," she said. "He said, 'California girls are so high-maintenance.' We had a good time."

Love at first sight? If so, it took 18 months to figure it out. "We stayed in touch by phone for a year and a half," Matt said. "Then we dated for three years. But everything worked out great."

The friendship grew into more when Kelly returned from a trip to Mexico and found a cell-phone message awaiting her. "I turned to my mom and said, 'Matt called.' He wanted to come for a visit. I had to Google him to remember all about him. But the instant he arrived, I knew."

The timing was favorable for Bettencourt. The grind of golf's minors was telling, and in 2007 he considered quitting to take a job with TaylorMade Golf (now one of his sponsors). "I decided to give myself two more years," he said.

Kelly, whose brother, Brian, played golf at Newberry, was adamant about staying the course. "I said, 'You've got to go for it, you can't give up. ... One year will be your year. Eventually it'll happen.'"

In December 2007, it did. Bettencourt reached the finals of Q-school and earned a spot on the Nationwide Tour for 2008; then, with six tournaments to play and ranked 77th on the money list, he went on a tear: four top-five finishes, including wins at the Oregon Classic and the Tour Championship, the latter boosting him to No. 1 on the money list and earning him his 2009 PGA Tour exemption.

But -- of course -- it did not come easily. Shortly before midnight two days before the start of the Tour Championship, his caddie rushed him to an emergency room. "It felt like I'd been stabbed in the back," Bettencourt said. "They knew right away: 'You've got a kidney stone.'" Four hours after being hooked to an IV, he passed it.

"My only thought was, 'Can I tee it up (on Thursday)?' I was sore, just making it through, but I got stronger as the week went on." On Sunday, he birdied the final hole, sinking a 6-foot putt for a one-shot win -- and a dose of perspective.

"That was a blessing," he said. "God was on my side, because it could've happened on the golf course, and then I never would've won the tournament, and that was important."

It also was, or so it seems, a sign of adventures to come.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

Before the Memorial Tournament, Bettencourt was enduring an oft-typical rookie season: a few so-so finishes and nine missed cuts in 17 events. His best week was at Quail Hollow in Charlotte, where his shaky putting finally came through and he tied for 22nd.

Playing Nicklaus' tournament on a sponsor's exemption, he shot 71-68-68 and was tied for the lead. Woods' come-from-behind victory had a number of victims, but Bettencourt didn't feel like one.

"People kept saying, 'It must be disappointing,' but it really wasn't," Kelly said. "We just wanted a good finish; a win would've been a bonus. He would've liked (to finish) higher, but he hung in there, didn't fall apart, so it was all positive.

"And being his best finish all year, it helped his confidence."

Bettencourt sees it that way, too. "Golf's a confidence game," he said, "and when you hang in there with guys you've seen on TV so many years, you know you can perform under the gun."

That was never truer than on Monday. Kelly drove him to the Open qualifying site at 6 a.m., deciding to take the advice of caddie Brandon Antus to skip the first 18 holes of the 36-hole test. When she returned, "(Bettencourt) was not happy" about his 71, she said. "He said, 'I have to shoot seven or eight under now.'"

Which he did -- in the rain, no less. Kelly was there, having bought an umbrella to follow her husband. "He made an eagle, then a bogey, and said, 'I've got to birdie number eight and nine,' and I said, 'Go do it.' He looked at me and started laughing -- and then he did it."

When he was done, the first congratulatory message was from Mediate. The two played three days together at Quail Hollow, and "we hit it off instantly," Bettencourt said. "Rocco and I have exactly the same personality; we're basically like brothers now."

Bettencourt even had Antus, Mediate's former caddie, on his bag for the first time. It was Antus, Kelly said, who looked at Bettencourt during Monday's first round and said tersely, "You going to wake up and play today?"

He did, and as a result he is playing in the biggest event of his career. The fun begins today when he and Mediate negotiate the long, demanding Bethpage Black layout for a practice round.

Beyond that, who knows? Given their track record, nothing will surprise the Bettencourt contingent: Kelly's parents and Matt's family from California. Usually, even the bad things work out for the good.

Take the theft of Bettencourt's clubs and wedding ring at the Byron Nelson. Matt had taken his bag to his courtesy car, putting his ring in a jewelry pouch, before taking 20 minutes for breakfast -- enough time for a thief to smash a window and steal it all.

TaylorMade quickly made a new set of clubs, "and it's been a blessing in disguise," he said. "I was hitting an

old TaylorMade driver; I'm now hitting a new R9 460, and it's the greatest driver I've hit." The wedding ring, too, has been replaced -- and is staying home this week.

Then there was the trip to the Verizon Heritage, when Matt missed the cut -- and Kelly accidentally parked their car in the wrong place. "Cost us \$750 to get it out (of the towing lot)," she said. "The Heritage paid half of that. We just laughed at it again."

This week at the U.S. Open, they can't wait to discover what comes next.

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