

Hey, BUDDY!

A look at what happens when friends get together 'beyond the game'

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**SPOTS WE LOVE
FOR BUDDY TRIPS**

Bandon Dunes

Bandon, Oregon

Self-contained with lodging and dining, 84 holes of golf, massive practice facility

Monterey Peninsula

Pick your course, from the local favorite Pacific Grove Golf Links, to the tour-tested Bayonet and Black Horse courses, to the notable Pebble Beach Golf Links and Spyglass Hill. Be sure to catch drinks and the bagpiper at the Inn at Spanish Bay!

The Prairie Club

Valentine, Nebraska

About as remote as you'll get, but it's one price to play all day, 36 championship holes, plus the ultra-cool "Horse Course"

RTJ Golf Trail

A host of choices in Alabama.

The PGA Tour comes to Grand National in Opelika beginning in 2015

In the summer of 2001, Links Players started recruiting participants for a national gathering on the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail courses in Mobile, Alabama. Big ideas for the Gulf Coast in the early fall. Perfect.

Then came September 11, and travel was the last desire on anyone's mind. We announced the cancellation of the event.

But a call came to our offices from Jim Scotti, a businessman from Houston. He had one question: "Can we still go?"

It made sense, of course, for these Houstonians would be driving. No airplane worries. And since there were just four of them, no heavy duty coordination.

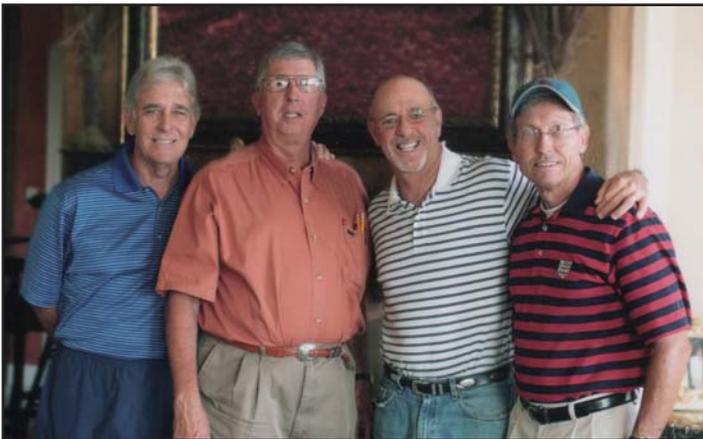
So they went. And they had a time so rich that they went again in 2002. And 2003. And every fall since. It's as many as 20 guys now, at a different stop on the RTJ Trail each year. There are the diehards and, each year, the newbies. But the enjoyment goes on, as does that richness.

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Everybody loves a good buddy trip. Food, drink, golf, laughter. It's an almost unbeatable combination. But what has been different for the Houston group, and many others like them that we've found, is this: the conversation turns to God. There's study and debate and prayer.

This really is "beyond the game" stuff. You may go home with the signature shirts, the course ball marks, and a scorecard showing how you beat your amigos at a world-class venue. But the memories have much to do with the people you shared it with and the spiritual encouragement you exchanged with one another.

Woody Thames played at the University of Texas and competed in the US, British and French Amateurs. Overall, he's played in eight USGA national championships. But he was never the best player in his favorite foursome. That honor belonged to Randy Wolff, a five-year PGA Tour veteran who once led the US Open through 36 holes. Wolff has been the South Central region director for Links Players



Old friends. Cullen Ramsey, Woody Thames, Randy Wolff, and Gary Christopher in 2008, ten years into their purposeful trips together.

since 2006. Wolff, Thames and fellow Texans Cullen Ramsey and Gary Christopher, the four have been going at each other on the golf course since high school in the 1960s. But in 1999, with priorities shifting, they began to weave a new purpose into the golf trips.

“The four of us wanted to be accountability-mentor partners for one another,” Thames says. “We were too competitive in the early years of that relationship and now have matured and grown. Aches and pains have kind of set it in, but there’s more to it than golf. Even though we rant and rave when we make a birdie or hit a good shot or whatever, it’s not about our golf score. That’s a major lesson that everybody needs to learn at some time, hopefully sooner rather than later.”

So the buddies head to a favorite golf venue at least once a year. They’ve enjoyed special spots, like Prairie Dunes and Sand Hills. But they’ve also stayed close to home. Their fall 2014 trip took them to Christopher’s house outside San Antonio. While Christopher’s wife was away for a conference, the four men took over the house. Bad weather wiped out most of their golf, but Thames called that “the good news,” because they “spent the deepest, most spiritual time, morning, noon, and night, sharing what God was doing in each of our lives, praying for each other, crying with each other.”

Not your typical golf outing.

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Pete Bronson is a writer. Much of his career was spent with the *Cincinnati Inquirer*, where he became a columnist offering observations on life in and around the Cincinnati region.

One day he received a letter from a reader unknown to him, a sort of drifter named Ray Neighbor. A recent column had struck home with Neighbor, and he wrote in talking about his own diagno-

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IDEAS FROM THE MASTER

Lexington family court judge **Tim Philpot** spends nearly all his vacation time arranging small golf trips of 8-12 players. Check out his insight.

Make sure the golf courses are memorable

You don’t have to pay top-end money, but you do want to play someplace where the course is in good condition and some of the holes are truly memorable.

Don’t just go with the same people you play with all the time

A small core is okay but find new guys.

Someone has to be in charge

Don’t let the group decide where to eat and what time to play. Be ready to tell ‘em what to do.

Add time into schedule to tell life stories without sermons

Sometimes 36 holes a day leaves no time for anything but golf.

Leave the “super Christians” at home

Is that rough? I want guys turned on to the faith, not turned off. And be fair—make sure non-believers get a ‘hint’ before they sign up that this is more than just golf. Then let them be themselves.

Have some sort of competition

Match play is best, because no one has to turn in scores. It’s no fun to shoot 87 when your handicap says 4. Feels better to say, “I lost 3 & 2.”



WHAT ABOUT THE LADIES?

Are buddies trips only for guys? When we asked one of our favorite professional women if she had ever been on a golf trip with a spiritual emphasis, she said, “I have not known of a specific group who plays golf and combines spiritual things. We should work on that. I would love to have that experience.”

So we’re ready to work on it, and we’ve asked long-time LPGA Tour player and Links Daily Devotional writer Tracy Hanson to help us out.

If you want to arrange a trip “beyond the game” for your group of lady golfers, email us linksladies@linksplayers.com, and we’ll put you in touch with Tracy.

sis with pancreatic cancer. Bronson loved the letter, featured a big chunk of it in a follow-up column, and an unlikely friendship was born.

At a Christian Businessmen’s Connection (CBMC) meeting, Bronson introduced Neighbor to Tim Philpot, a Lexington, Kentucky, family court judge who had previously served in the Kentucky state senate and been president of CBMC International. Philpot also took a liking to Neighbor and suggested that he and Bronson head out to California to join one of the frequent golf trips that Philpot puts together.

Not long before Neighbor succumbed to his cancer in the spring of 2014, it was to that trip that he and Bronson returned in their memories.

“We didn’t know each other that well when we went, but we marveled at how we seemed to hit it off instantly,” Bronson narrates. “There was no stress, no awkward moment. He’d be up there on the balcony having his morning coffee and cigarette, while I’d go out for a run. We’d say hi and just laugh at each other. It was so funny.

“On the golf course, neither of us were great, and we were both struggling. I remember one scene where he was across from me and we were in bunkers on opposites of the fairway. And he was flailing away and I was flailing away, and we both looked at each other and just broke down laughing.”

The friendship continued to grow, and it was Bronson who assisted Neighbor—the self-professed “heroin addict, convict, thief, and homeless bum”—in writing a surprisingly popular ebook about his life, *Dance When You Can*.

Neighbor’s journey through cancer was a long one, far longer than it was anticipated to be. The average pancreatic cancer patient survives two years; Neighbor lived 12.

“I always said, ‘God has a reason. There’s a purpose for you, Ray,’” Bronson says. “I think it was his book, which reached so many people. It was a chance for him to sort things out and let his faith grow. He never thought he had enough, so he talked about the mustard seed a lot. He used to say, ‘If I’m going to heaven, it will have to be in the trailer park, ’cause I’m not good enough for the best part.’”

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So let’s be honest about these “buddy trips with a higher purpose.” Not everyone who goes is convinced about the purpose part. But pick a perfect time and place, and plenty of guys simply can’t resist. “Golf is a magnet,” Bronson says. “Ask somebody, ‘Hey, would you like to go on a golf trip to Palm Springs?’ and they’re like, ‘Are you kidding? Of course, I would!’”

Jim Scotti admits that his faith was anything but firm when he signed up to go to Mobile. “I saw an advertisement about it and the first thing that came to my mind was, *Hey, here’s a way to go play golf and my wife won’t be mad.*”

When the outing was cancelled and Scotti decided he’d go with his buddies anyway, he suddenly realized that he was in charge. “I figured, OK, I’ve made this thing happen, I’ve got to give it some



Side by side. Jim Scotti and Larry Cessnun extended their friendship last fall during their twelfth trip together to the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail in Alabama.

effort other than just playing golf.” In the end, Scotti discovered he was “probably the weakest one there” in terms of his faith.

But the experience was monumental for Scotti. “It was the first time that I really ever sat with three other men and talked about our lives or our needs. I’d never really prayed out loud with anybody. But it happened in that little environment in Point Clear, Alabama, as a part of Links Players. But I knew coming back that this was something I wanted to do every year.”

He wasn’t coming back alone. He approached his friend Larry Cessnun—his counterpart at another company—and invited him to join them the next year. “I remember he looked at me like I was from outer space,” Scotti laughs. “He said, ‘Well, I’ll come, but I’m not going to be involved with all that religious stuff.’”

Twelve trips later, Cessnun says he still isn’t sure. “I don’t want to be a hypocrite,” he says, “I don’t want to be the oddball in the deal. But I’ve made most of the guys aware of it. I say, ‘You know, I’m the least religious guy in the room.’ I know there’s something, but I don’t know exactly what it is. The bell has never gone off for me. I’ve never had that thing that says, ‘This is it. Now I’ve got it.’ But what I will say is that this prayer scenario we started doing..”

And from there, Scotti and Cessnun start recounting the amazing answers to prayer they have seen come out of the group: an end to drug addiction, medical miracles, the emergency room resuscitation of Cessnun’s own daughter. “It seems like just about every prayer we’ve done has had impact,” Cessnun marvels.

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One year in Alabama, the Houston crew included a marginally interested fellow named Gordon. He admitted to going to church mostly to please his wife. But he loved golf, so he came along. “He smoked like a fiend,” Scotti recalls, “so when we used to have our evening meetings in somebody’s room, he’d go out on the balcony and smoke and listen in through the screen. But one night when we were ending and everybody was going around talking about how their weekend went and stuff, Gordon said, ‘I finally get it. This is not all about golf, is it?’”

5 WHO CAN HELP

Our own Links Players staff are uniquely positioned to help welcome you and your buddies on a trip at some pretty great golf locations where they already oversee Links Fellowships and know the best courses, restaurants, and accommodations. Feel free to contact them and pick their brains



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