

HOW AN LPGA PLAYER SAVED A LIFE AND MY SMALL ROLE IN IT

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When people ask why I became a golf writer I say I don't write about golf; I write about people who happen to play golf. For me, it has always been about more than numbers on a scorecard. It has been about learning what is in the head and the heart of the player.

Part of the reason the LPGA is the best beat I have ever had is that it truly is different out here. They are the most accessible athletes I've ever been around. They let you get to know them, and the better you know someone the better you can write about them.

There are many players I consider friends and I'm friendly with almost all of them. The ones I don't know it's my fault for not making the effort. I've been to engagement parties, weddings, visited homes, had a bunch of dinners and played golf with them. I've gotten thank-you notes from players when I've written about them.

You have no idea how rare that kind of interaction is in a world of professional sports where it sometimes seems as if the "overly entitled" card is handed out along with playing privileges. LPGA players truly do think like a founder.

When I left the news desk at The Associated Press at the age of 37 to join the Sports Department part of me bought into the stereotype that I was leaving “real journalism” to go to the “toy store.” Instead, I brought my skills as a journalist to sports and have always worked to show a bigger picture than merely who won.

Still, there are many times – especially when I see heartache in the world – when I wonder if what I do matters. Then something happens like this week when I was able to write about the remarkable work former LPGA player Sophie Gustafson is doing to combat her lifelong stutter.

In that column, I mention a teenage boy named Dillon that Sophie has mentored about his stutter. I first wrote about Dillon nearly three years ago when Sophie told me he had been bullied so badly at school that he attempted suicide.

Today I got an email from Dillon. Let me share some of it with you:

“I just wanted to tell you, that I do not think you could possibly understand the impact that you had on my life. You and Ms. Sophie. When you wrote the first story about me, and so many people responded to encourage me, I could never imagine that so many strangers would care enough about me to respond. Those were some tough times I had at school. The worst part of the day for me was sitting alone at the lunch table. That is the loneliest feeling in the world. I felt worthless.”

In the story I wrote in 2015, I mentioned that Dillon's favorite golfer is Tiger Woods. Tiger's camp reached out to me and asked how to contact Dillon. I got an address and several days later, Dillon received a letter from Tiger.

"I would carry around a copy of the story you wrote and a copy of Tiger's letter in my binder and on tough days, I would read them and be reminded, 'I got this. I can overcome this,'" wrote Dillon, who will graduate in the spring, has made the Honor Roll every semester since he received the letter from Tiger, works in the Special Needs classroom, something he hopes can be his job some day, and wants to organize anti-bullying efforts.

"Those kids depend on me and appreciate me. For the first time in my life, I felt like I WAS SOMEBODY!" he says. "I tell my younger sisters and cousins, hey, if you see a kid sitting alone at lunch, walk over and offer to sit with them. It may seem like a small gesture to you, but it could change that kid's day and help them not feel that worthless, lonely feeling. I feel I have a purpose, to help others, and you, Mr. Ron, helped me fulfill that purpose by telling my story."

I was able to tell that story because an LPGA player – Sophie – took the time to mentor Dillon and then thought to reach out to me when bullying drove him to an attempt on his life. I'm a lucky man standing between two incredibly strong people fighting real battles. It's an honor to tell their stories.

"Please know, your work does matter," Dillon wrote. "I was a complete stranger to you that felt the need to end my

life and did not see any reason to go on, and now I have goals, I have a confidence that I never knew I had. That happened because you and Ms. Sophie took time out of your busy schedules to show me that people do care and we can overcome any obstacle.”

He ended by saying:

“The day I sat on my window sill to jump to concrete below, I felt that I was absolutely nothing and that I could not face living in this world another day. Now, I look forward to what I can become. I am sure you had no idea how God was going to use you in my life.”

No, Dillon, I didn't. Thank you for letting me into your world. It changed my life as much as yours.