

1

**INSIDE THE BELLY
OF THE BEAST:
BEHIND THE SCENES
AT THE WORLD LONG-DRIVE
CHAMPIONSHIP**

There's nothing like standing there on the tee in final round of the World Long-Drive Championship, under the lights, with the grid stretching out in front of you in the Nevada desert, glowing green in the middle of all that sand. Four thousand people are jammed into the grandstand 20 feet behind you, but you can't hear them. That's the thing that tightens your throat the most—how silent it gets when you're set up over your shot, trying to hit a big, big ball to win the title you've spent almost every waking moment of the year preparing for. It can make a 50-yard-wide grid look like a two-lane road. Those portable stadium lights feel like they're all pointed right at you.

In the final round, every guy there can take it deep, with club-head speed 25 miles per hour faster than the longest players on the PGA Tour can generate—fast enough to hit a golf ball through a three-quarter-inch-thick piece of plywood. Those six guys are the top of a long-drive pyramid that started with 14,000 local qualifiers and finishes in one of sports' biggest pressure cookers. Since the World Championship started in 1995, I've made the final round

seven times, and I've won 'em—and lost 'em—every way you can do it.

In 2001, I hit what's been called the most clutch shot in the history of the sport, a 376-yard drive on my last ball in the final round to win my second world title. But sometimes it goes the other way, too. In 2000, I was swinging faster and hitting it harder than anybody in Nevada, but I couldn't keep it on the grid, and I didn't get through the semifinals. In the 1997 final round, I hit one 406 yards, right down the middle of the grid, but my ball rolled into a bunker nobody thought was in play. Jason Zuback hit it 412 just to the side of the same bunker and beat me.

Of all the guys who have a dream that they can someday say they're the biggest hitter in golf, only 128 of them make it to Mesquite, Nevada, to take their shot at getting on ESPN under those lights. The championship is organized in a modified round-robin format. We get divided into eight groups of sixteen with two heats each, and the only way to guarantee that you'll move forward is to finish in the top two of your heat. You get six balls in each round to prove you deserve to go to the next round. Get a bad draw, with two guys who are just cranking it? Too bad. Not swinging your best the first day of the event? You don't get any mulligans, and there's no next week. You're going home, no matter what your name is.

What you *can* control is hitting your best shot and making other guys beat you. Look at everybody hitting on the range, and you're not going to pick me to win. But you can't see what's in a guy's gut or in his heart. When I won in 2005, there were a lot of guys who could flat kill it who didn't get to the finals. It's not about the guy who can hit it the longest. It's about the guy who can manage his emotions, hit it solid, and handle everybody watching him.

I've been in this sport twenty years, and I've seen funny things happen to guys who looked like they were cut out of stone. I've

watched guys who hit it 390 in the first round of qualifying on Thursday but couldn't tee it up in the quarterfinals because their hands were shaking so much. Just like the PGA Tour or the NBA, at this level it's not all about who has the most physical skill or strength. You've got to be an exceptional hitter of the golf ball to get yourself in position to win a World Long-Drive Championship, but the true test is what goes on in your head, not with your muscles or your golf swing.

I've seen it happen a hundred times. There's a core group of four or five guys who are the favorites, year after year, guys who have proven themselves time and again. We show up expecting to make the final group of six. And every year there's some phenomenal guy who's supposed to hit it out of sight and beat everybody. But it's always the same guys who advance. It's been that way for twenty years. Why is that?

Almost every other guy in the sport is beat before he even hits his first ball. It's easy to see why. When you get to the practice range at the World Championship, you see twenty or thirty big, muscular guys wailing away. You hear all the whispering about who did what in practice or in the qualifying—how this guy hit it 400 yards, or that guy is really killing it. You see Zuback, with his five world titles, or Viktor Johansson, the 2000 champion, who's 6 foot 6 and 280 pounds. It's like that scene in the movie *Hoosiers* when the kids from Hickory are watching the team from South Bend Central warm up before the state championship game. Some guys need Gene Hackman to come by and remind them that the grid is 55 yards wide for everybody, not just the stars.

Wondering whether you belong is a huge hurdle for a lot of guys, because you just never know. If you aren't mentally strong, you can't walk down the driving range without blowing all your confidence. You see a new shaft or a new head, and you think a guy

has something you don't, and there's a little doubt there. It happened to me early in my career, and I learned the hard way that I needed to trust my preparation, do my thing, and hit my ball. The guys who haven't figured that out yet? They're donators. They're the ones who sign on for the championship year after year with no chance to win—like all those amateurs who spend \$10,000 to enter the World Series of Poker. It's dead money. Those entry fees have been paying part of my winner's checks.

I'll be on the practice range getting ready on Tuesday morning of championship week and I'll see a new guy out there, just killing it. You can tell he's feeling good about himself by the way he's posing after every shot, kind of checking out of the corner of his eye to see if anybody's watching. After 30 or 40 shots, he puts his driver away and takes a walk down the range to see what he's up against—to see who's going to finish second. He'll walk behind Dave Gureckis, who really smokes it in practice, and just turn dead pale. Then he goes back to his bag all flustered and starts looking for a new driver—something to help him find the 20 more yards he knows he's going to need. When he starts hitting it again, he's lunging at it, overswinging and getting out of sync.

Or worse yet, he'll go over to one of the equipment reps working the range and ask for a lighter shaft—the day before the event! The guy has been getting ready for four months, and he gets to Mesquite and changes everything he's doing. Swing, setup, all of it. It's crazy. He's been practicing by himself for four months, admiring the big balls he hits on his range at home, but when it comes time to do it with the lights on, that's a different beast. I'm telling you, it takes a lot of self-confidence to be able to block that out and just do your thing.

The entire week of the championship, I've got a thousand-yard stare on, concentrating on what I've got going on in front of

me—to the point that friends walk by and say hello and I don't even hear them. It's not me being an asshole. It's focus. Hey, this isn't camp or some kind of retreat or vacation. It blows my mind to see guys treat it as if it is, because winning can change your life. I'm not saying I've never stayed out a little too late the night before a tournament, but when I saw how much money I could make, I got real serious about it.

The reality of our sport is that the pool of talent is very wide in terms of guys who have the ability to hit the ball far, but the payout is only there for a select few who can kill it, but also have the charisma to be appealing to corporate America. It costs me \$500 to enter the World Championship. Add another \$3,000 in expenses for the week there. Come in third, and after taxes I might break even. Might. There are three or four of us making six figures as long drivers. The key is to be able to capitalize when you win the World Championship and show the world what you can do, because you aren't going to make your nut just from the prize money.

The 2001 event is what made it for me. When I won the 1995 title, I was pretty much unknown, and the sport hadn't gotten a lot of exposure on ESPN yet. By 2001, Zuback had drawn a ton of attention, winning four straight titles and getting on the cover of *Golf Digest*. The first-prize check had moved up to \$80,000, from the \$30,000 it was in 1995.

I sure picked the right year to hit the shot of my life.

The final group set up almost as if it was planned for television. Zuback hit the longest ball of all the semifinalists, at 378, and Brian Pavlet had been hitting it great all week. Zuback came up second and had what was for him a bad set. He hit it 353, seven yards behind Pat Dempsey, who had come out first. Pavlet crushed his second ball 373 to take the lead, then came back to the practice range after he finished to let me know I was going to have to bring

it. He walked behind me as I was hitting balls and started snapping tees to get my attention. He said, “You better hit it hard.”

I drew the last slot of the six, so I knew exactly what I had to do. The left side of the grid was firm, where they’d been driving some maintenance carts through during the week. I got up and aimed down that side but hooked the first two out of bounds. I aimed a little more right on the third one and lost it to the right. I didn’t quite catch the fourth one, but at least got it into play at 361. On my fifth ball, I blocked another out of bounds to the right.

The crowd was going nuts, howling for me to catch my last ball solid. But when I stepped up behind the ball to start my routine, they went completely quiet. I looked over and saw people patting Pavlet on the back. I saw another guy lean over to Brian and say to him, “There’s no way.” Honestly, that really pissed me off. I knew Brian was watching to see if I was going to take his first world title away from him and crossing his fingers. There’s no way? I wanted so badly to show them there *was* a way, and I was going to lay it on them right there.

I went through my complete focusing routine (which I’ll tell you more about in chapter 6), took a deep breath, and let it go. At impact, I knew I hit it hard enough. But I’ve been in enough of these championships to know that the ball can hit soft and check up, even if you carry it deep. The grid is like a checkerboard. It isn’t consistent, like the lane at a bowling alley. My ball landed at 357 and released and rolled out past 373. When I saw it roll past Brian’s mark, I just went nuts, high-fiving people in the stands and generally just losing my mind. I had hit it 376 on the last ball, when the temperature was dropping, with no tailwind. It was the greatest shot of my life, at the biggest moment, on the last ball of the

entire championship. That's going to be tough to top, even if I stay in the sport another ten years.

Now that I'm one of the "old guys" out there, I'm sure the younger guys roll their eyes when I start talking about how different the World Championship is now compared to when I got started. But it's true. Back in the early 1990s, when it was the National Championship, not the World Championship, you had forty or fifty guys out there competing. There were fifteen or twenty really tight guys and then another twenty or so on the fringe, and that was the sport, period. It was very hard to break into that clique, and it didn't happen for me until 1995. You used to want to see other guys do well, almost because there wasn't enough money in it to get really upset about.

And the scene surrounding the championship? It's incredible how much that's changed. When I started competing, there might have been a hundred people in the gallery—and 90 percent of them were competitors who had been eliminated, the rest being family members. There weren't enough to fill even a small set of stands behind the tee. We held the event at some nice places, but it was probably more of a nuisance to the resorts that hosted it than anything else. Evan "Big Cat" Williams was the big attraction then, and what he was doing—fifty or so exhibitions a year—was considered the ultimate. When Art Sellinger got involved and basically bought the sport, in the early 1990s, things got much more organized. When I won in 1995, I think there were 2,500 entrants in the field. In 2001, there were 13,000. The main growth of the sport has come from the competitors—the number of guys who are chasing the dream—but fan attention has grown, too. More than 3,000 people were in the stands for the 2006 final round.

The finals were out in Mesquite for the first time in 1997, but

they hadn't quite figured it all out yet. They put us on the actual first hole of the Casablanca Golf Club, hitting from the back tee, 415 yards from the green. I walked the grid with Art Sellinger early in the week, and we had a hellacious tailwind. I told him that somebody was going to hit the ball into the middle of that bunker in the finals and get screwed. Sure enough, I carried it 386 in the final round and landed it right in the middle of that trap. Zuback hit his three or four yards right of mine, missed the trap, and rolled it up onto the green to beat me. After that happened, they moved it across town to the driving range at the Palms, the setup you see now on ESPN every year.

Winning on the last ball in 2001 got me a tremendous amount of attention. ESPN made it an ESPN Classic episode, and it must have run fifty or sixty times. I got out there and made some good sponsorship deals—people want to be around people who are good at something. In 1997, I saw an ad for Dunlop, and I wanted to get balls for free, so I wrote a letter to the president of the company asking him if he wanted to have the longest driver in America hit his golf ball. I told him I'd earn the money first. I'd get on ESPN during the World Championship, and I'd work my ass off to get his brand as much exposure as possible. I did get on television at the championship, and I was in an instruction spread in *Golf Tips* magazine, so Dunlop gave me a contract for \$25,000. I started showing up at tournaments with a lot of logos all over my shirt, and there was a quite a bit of sniping that went with that.

One year, I went to the PGA Merchandise Show, and I came to find out that two fringe long drivers had gone to all my sponsors and told them they were friends of mine and wanted deals, too. Of course, I had no idea who they were. That was just the start of all the jealousy and backstabbing that goes on. But when the top guys started making some money at this sport, a lot of things changed.

When I won my title in 2001, I basically took it away from Pavlet on that last big drive—and it would have been his first world championship. I know he was just devastated and felt like he had missed his big chance. We had been good friends for five or six years before that, rooming together on the road and everything. But after 2001, we drifted apart, and he stopped returning my calls. We exchange hugs and hellos at the World Championship, but that's about it. They joke about it being lonely at the top, but it's true. Zuback might be the only other guy who knows how that feels.

There are so many misconceptions about what this sport is like and what winning the World Championship does for you. Winning by itself doesn't change your life. You have to be marketable, too. You have to be able to carry a conversation with a corporate executive. You have to be able to talk to his customers. You have to know when to talk and when to be quiet. You have to know when to talk business and when not to.

Zuback and I get paid more than anybody else, without a doubt, as far as active competitors go. There might be three or four guys on the tier right below who make a decent living. Below that are guys who make some money but still need to have a day job. The level below that, they're making no money at this. We don't turn anybody away, that's for sure. It's grassroots. If you can swing the club 150 miles per hour, it doesn't matter what you look like. But if the wrong guy catches one and wins, that's going to back the sport up a little bit because he doesn't know what to do with it. We've already got the image of a bunch of gorillas who swing hard but don't know how to play real golf. All we need is some guy in a yellow tank top and spandex shorts winning a world title to send it right over the edge. That's not exactly going to grow the sport.

Now, expanding the World Championship to 15,000 people instead of 50 has brought some big benefits, especially for me. It

means more entry fee money and more attention from the media. That certainly makes my sponsors happy. But the drawback is that there are a lot of young, strong guys who are getting interested in what I have.

You used to be able to be conservative early in the competition and kind of work your way into it. I've always broken my six balls into two groups of three; I'm conservative on the first three and aggressive on the second three, once I have a qualifier on the grid. But when more guys got into the sport, the early rounds started getting filled with these giant guys you don't know anything about. It's too risky to go through an early round now expecting to coast. One of those monsters could get lucky and catch one and send you home. I know I have to keep one "scary ball" in reserve if I need it, because there's a chance somebody could pop one and take me out.

The improvements in equipment certainly have been great for the average guy playing his weekend game, for sure. It's so much easier to hit the ball than it used to be, with big-headed drivers and balls that don't spin as much. And the longest drivers in the sport are hitting it longer than ever. But the flip side is that the big, forgiving drivers give every half-talented guy a puncher's chance, especially early in the event. They've even widened the grid from 40 yards to 55 to encourage this whole gunslinger mentality. It's a testament to Zuback that he's been able to win five titles, because he has to prove himself every year, every round, and fight his way through a forest of 6-foot-6 guys built like superheroes, just like I do.

You can imagine what happens when you have a group of 128 big, strong guys who swing a club as hard as possible getting together. There's a tremendous amount of ego and testosterone overflowing. That applies to everything from the way a guy walks

up and down the practice range to the way he wears a skintight shirt to show off his muscles. Guys are trying to use intimidation to gain an advantage, even if it's a small one. I've definitely had people tell me I look intimidating. Maybe it's because I don't always trim my goatee just right. I'm known as an opinionated guy, and that's also given me problems over the years (and I'm sure saying stuff like this in this book won't help).

The funny thing about all that ego and testosterone is that it changes the dynamic of the competition. When you're playing golf against an opponent, deep down you're hoping he makes a mistake so you can win. I know that's what I'm thinking when my buddy Doug is standing over a birdie putt back home. But in long driving, you're hoping the guy who's going against you in the finals absolutely nuts it and hits his career drive. Because if he doesn't, and you get up there and beat him, he's going to remind you of that for the rest of your life—to the point that your win seems almost tainted.

Believe me, I know how crazy that sounds. But I'll be the first to admit that my win in 2001 was the most satisfying, because the last ball I hit was as hard as I could hit one, and I heard the first four finalists say in their interviews that they had hit it with all they had. That meant that my best was better than their best. And when I've hit my best shot, I've never been beat.

Does that make me cocky? Probably. But I think it's also what gives me my edge. I want to win so badly and I want to beat those guys so much that I'm basically willing myself to do it. If I'm going up against a guy who's adjusting his shirt so it looks good on television or is preoccupied with the color of the shaft on his driver, he's got no chance.

Everybody wants the attention. Long driving isn't any different from Ultimate Fighting or even NBA basketball in that respect.

When I first started, it was about the recognition, sure, but it was also about the money. I was trying to make this my job. Now that I've been successful, I've got contracts that pay me enough that it's only about winning. I don't worry as much about the money. I want more hardware. And to leave a legacy.