

THE DROP-SHOT PAR 3 • THE REDNECK • THE SEVEN TRUTHS

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The REDNECK GOLFER?

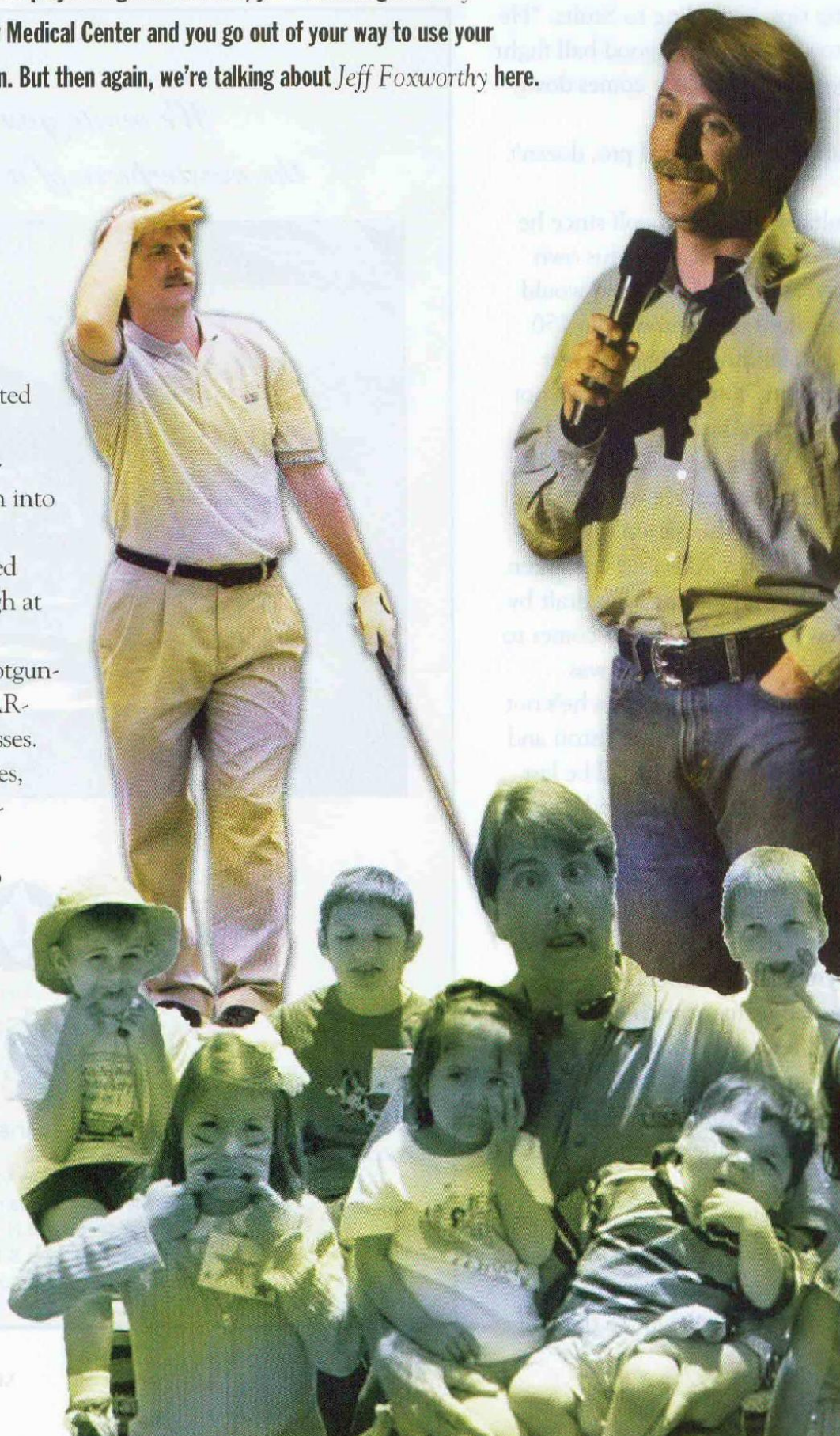
You're probably not a *redneck* if you've played Augusta National, you host a huge charity tournament for the Duke University Medical Center and you go out of your way to use your celebrity status to help sick children. But then again, we're talking about Jeff Foxworthy here.

BY PATRICK JONES

Comedian Jeff Foxworthy's patented "You might be a redneck if..." one-liners are colloquial fabric woven into the American lexicon. The Hapeville, Ga., native has banked millions by making millions laugh at his good-natured pokes at the dysfunctional leanings of the shotgun-toting, T-shirt wearing, NASCAR-worshipping, pickup-driving masses.

Despite his favorite punchlines, Foxworthy emphasizes that card-carrying membership in the redneck brethren has nothing to do with income brackets and everything to do with good ol' boy attitude – "a glorious absence of sophistication," he calls it – and it traverses all geographic and socio-economic borders. Golfers are not immune to the lack of refinement that Foxworthy so keenly observes, and his

JEFF FOXWORTHY IN THREE OF HIS FAVORITE ROLES: GOLFER, STAND-UP COMEDIAN AND MAKING SICK CHILDREN LAUGH.



personal on-course inspirations have sometimes spawned the choicest fodder for blue-collar parody.

For example, you might be a redneck golfer if Foot Joy refers to the ecstasies of Bermuda grass tickling your bare feet for nine holes. Foxworthy did not write that line. Instead – and better yet – he lived that shameless, shoeless romp on the links.

Foxworthy has volunteered for a decade as the honorary chairman of the Duke Children's Hospital Golf Classic, held at the Duke University Golf Club in Durham, N.C. The charity work is a philanthropic commitment to critically ill children that he and his wife, Gregg, cherish and take very seriously. Yet, in his first year directing the golf event, Foxworthy's ingrained and perfected backwoods persona charged to center stage. He prompted everyone in his foursome, which included former Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Terry Bradshaw, to shed his shoes and socks for an entire back nine of golf.

"I am sure the folks at Duke went, 'Boy, what have we gotten ourselves into here,'" Foxworthy says. "It's so prestigious at the Duke University Golf Club. I just wanted them to know it was a little bit of a new era rolling in there, and that now that they had put a redneck into a position of influence we weren't going to take ourselves too seriously."

Though he dishes out world-class trailer-trash "disses," Foxworthy also proudly walks the dadgum walk. No, he doesn't live in a singlewide mobile home or subsist on barbecued squirrel. His genius is intimately identifying with his subject matter and flaunting his own self-proclaimed "redneckism" like a John Deere hat permanently stitched to his head.

For those unfamiliar with Foxworthy's niche as a salt-of-the-earth humorist, he's one of the most successful comedians of all time. He's sold more than 15 million albums,



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AT A GLANCE

Most memorable foursome: Included Fred Couples and Terry Bradshaw. "But wait a minute. I'm trying to remember if I ever played golf with three naked girls."

Low score: 85. River Pines Golf Course, Alpharetta, Ga.

Handicap: "I got up there where keeping a handicap didn't matter. I shot 93 or 94 most of the time."

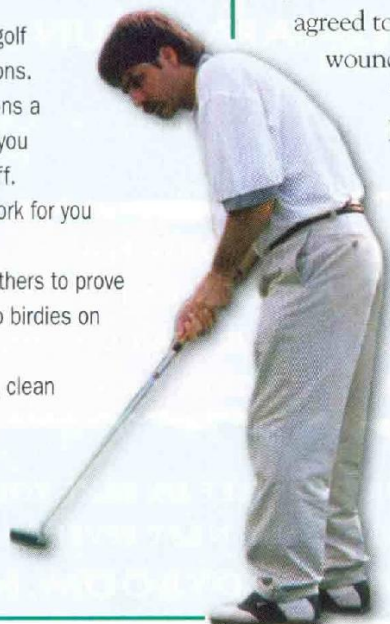
Critique of own golf game: "Pretty good putter. Not real long off the tee. Decent irons. A terrible chipper. I am so bad at chipping that when I played at Augusta (National) they followed me with a turf truck the whole day."

Favorite courses: Augusta National; Pinehurst No. 2; TPC at Sawgrass (Foxworthy carded a 3 on the famed No. 17); Hawks Ridge, Ball Ground, Ga.

Club memberships: CC of the South, Alpharetta, Ga.; Laurel Springs GC, Suwanee, Ga.

You might be a redneck golfer if:

- You think a "par" grows on a tree.
- Your best pair of golf shoes used to be someone else's.
- You keep a roll of duct tape in your bag.
- You buy all your golf balls in egg cartons.
- Someone mentions a skins game and you take your shirt off.
- Caddies never work for you more than once.
- You have the feathers to prove that you shot two birdies on the back nine.
- You think the lift, clean and replace rule requires making adjustments in your Jockey shorts.



surpassing the likes of Cosby, Carlin and Crystal. Foxworthy, 47, is the executive producer of the "Blue Collar TV" sketch comedy series and a member of the "Blue Collar Comedy Tour" that also features Larry the Cable Guy, Bill Engvall and Ron White. He's published more than a dozen books, hosts a nationally syndicated radio show heard in 220-plus markets and still carves out time for occasional solo stand-up appearances.

"It beats heavy lifting," Foxworthy says of his whirlwind schedule.

Even with those pressing demands, Foxworthy says his involvement with the Duke charity golf event remains a personal priority. His brother, Jay, played inside linebacker for the Duke football team in the 1980s. He was contacted about taking over the honorary chairman's role through that family affiliation.

Foxworthy remembers being "somewhere on the East Coast" preparing for a stand-up gig when a Duke Children's Hospital representative called. He was asked if he'd consider stopping by the hospital to visit with a few of the adolescent patients for "just 45 minutes." He agreed to set aside an hour and wound up staying for six.

"I just couldn't leave," Foxworthy recounts. "I called my wife on the trip home and told her, 'I don't know if you're going to do this or not, but these people have me.' I've kind of felt that way ever since."

But bless Foxworthy's kindhearted, funny-as-hell, Southern-fried soul, he ain't finding any empathy these days for his hibernating golf

game. While his comedic timing vaulted him to the heights of showbiz, his out-of-synch golf swing plunged him to the depths of disheartened hackerdom.

When Foxworthy's golf game completely abandoned him a few years ago, the sport, ironically, became a humorless pursuit. Foxworthy concluded it was time to put aside the clubs for a while. He needed a golf sabbatical.

"I love the game and I love watching golf," he says. "But I had to take a break from playing it for a while. I just hate not being good at something. It made me madder than anything that I have ever done. And it was because I couldn't play enough to get good at it."

As host of the Duke Children's Classic, Foxworthy played in the event for the first six years but now stays off the course. Instead, he focuses on his non-playing duties because "it got to the point that after I finished a round I had to go directly to the hospital to get checked for ticks because I had been in the woods so much."

Foxworthy recognizes that his nomadic existence and self-taught golf swing — one he freely describes as "ugly" — were not conducive to building a dependable game. "When you're bouncing from city to city, getting up and doing morning radio shows, television interviews and playing comedy clubs at night, I couldn't find enough time to play and get any better."

Even more alarming, golf was giving rise to Foxworthy's not-so-amusing alter ego. "I could throw a club with the best of them," he says. Foxworthy even confesses to letting them fly at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes tournament "of all places."

In true Foxworthy fashion, however, he finds humor in his darker

side. "I'm smarter than Smoltzie (Atlanta Braves pitcher John Smoltz, who is a close friend) because I throw my clubs over dry land. He throws them into the lake. See, you can get them back over dry land."

Creative imagery serves Foxworthy well in developing comedy material, but it did him little justice when wagging his driver on the tee box. While most players think about shaping their shots based on a hole's design, Foxworthy's swing thoughts and utterances were along the lines of: "Y'all think I can hit that squirrel down there?" It certainly evoked doubled-over laughter in his groups, but "I didn't put myself in position A in the fairway thinking things like that."

Foxworthy claims he was capable of scoring in the middle 80s when his

schedule allowed a round per week, but even that rare recreational time became too valuable. An epiphany finally clubbed him over the head in the middle of an exasperating round at Callaway Gardens in Pine Mountain, Ga., former site of the PGA Tour's Buick Challenge.

"It just hit me. I told the three guys I was playing with, 'Fellas, this is my last round of golf.' And I was suddenly filled with the peace that surpasses all understanding," he says. "I played so good those final six holes. On 18, I hit my second shot to within about six feet, made the putt and walked off with a bird(ie)."

Foxworthy knows the trial separation from golf won't last. In fact, he has a blood-brother promise with Smoltz, a scratch golfer, that will entice him back.

"We made a pact that as soon as we both slow down, I'm going to let Smoltzie rebuild my golf game," Foxworthy says. "And I'm going to teach him how to bowhunt."


Smoltz, however, might not be the best choice for rebuilding Foxworthy's golfing confidence based on a loaded exchange between the two in the first round they ever played together. It was an initial outing between buddies that Foxworthy confesses to intentionally delaying for as long as he could. Smoltz's solid golf game – his career-low score is a 62 – was as intimidating to Foxworthy as stepping to the plate and trying to hit one of Smoltz's sliders.

"I knew how good he was," Foxworthy says. "I mean, he plays with that Tiger guy all the time." (Smoltz and Woods frequently hook up in Florida during baseball spring training.)

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FOXWORTHY

In their initial outing at the Golf Club of Georgia, Foxworthy popped his opening drive about 220 yards. "I don't hit it very far, but it's in the middle of the fairway," he says. "I'm happy. I can see it." Smoltz followed with a booming 330-yard drive on the opening par-5 hole.

"On the way to the ball, Smoltzie says to me, 'Hey, you hear they're building a new shopping mall out this way?'"

"I said, 'Nah, I hadn't heard that. Where are they putting it?'"

"Smoltzie said, 'Somewhere between your ball and my ball.'"

"I said, 'Oh, crap. It's going to be a long day.' He eagles the first hole and away we go."

As for his career choice, Foxworthy says that friends who knew him when he was a wisecracking kid now say they're not surprised that he has made it fabulously as a comic. But his early business track – attending Georgia Tech and taking a job with IBM – was a purely straight-laced pursuit. Engineering schools and computer-making monoliths rarely breed famous satirists, but Foxworthy had a penchant for amusing his buttoned-down co-workers with his off-the-cuff commentaries. On their dares, the IBM customer engineer (his official job title) wrote five minutes of material about his family and delivered it during an amateur night competition at a metro Atlanta Punchline Comedy Club.

Foxworthy says he knew one minute into his first stand-up routine that he had found his calling. His ambitions were spurred on by winning the contest. He gave Big Blue the boot to pursue comedy, expecting he would "chase the dream for a couple of years" and then "come back with my hat in hand" asking for his old job back.

It's been a dizzying ride since he made his first appearance on The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson in 1990. Despite his fame and the demands on his time, Foxworthy still maintains an approachable, down-home sincerity and sensibility. His career launched into hyperspace when he relocated to Los Angeles in the early 1990s, but the self-absorption and celebrity worship rampant in the Hollywood entertainment scene never suited his style.

Not surprisingly, Foxworthy says he's thrilled to have his roots sunk back into his more-laid-back hometown of Atlanta. His fame is important to him only to the degree that he can use it to help others – most notably the beneficiaries of the Duke Children's Classic.

The star-studded, weekend celebrity golf event he hosts each May has raised more than \$13.5 million in its history. The goodwill and funds Foxworthy nurtures with corporate tournament sponsors lasts year-round. More importantly, it's allowed Duke Children's Hospital to treat more than 170,000 children and fund \$48 million in free-of-charge charity care in its most recent fiscal year.

Indeed, Foxworthy can be excused for not having his heart in playing golf these days; he's more consumed with humanitarian pursuits. The less time he spends "perfecting the chunked chip" – an admitted weakness in his game – the more children he knows he can help.

When Foxworthy's hectic, superstar lifestyle finally does wind down, he says he's eager for the day when it becomes clear to him to "dust off the clubs and ring up Smoltzie for some pointers." Whether the mustachioed czar of redneck comedy ever chooses to wear his golf shoes and socks back on the course again remains to be seen. ♦