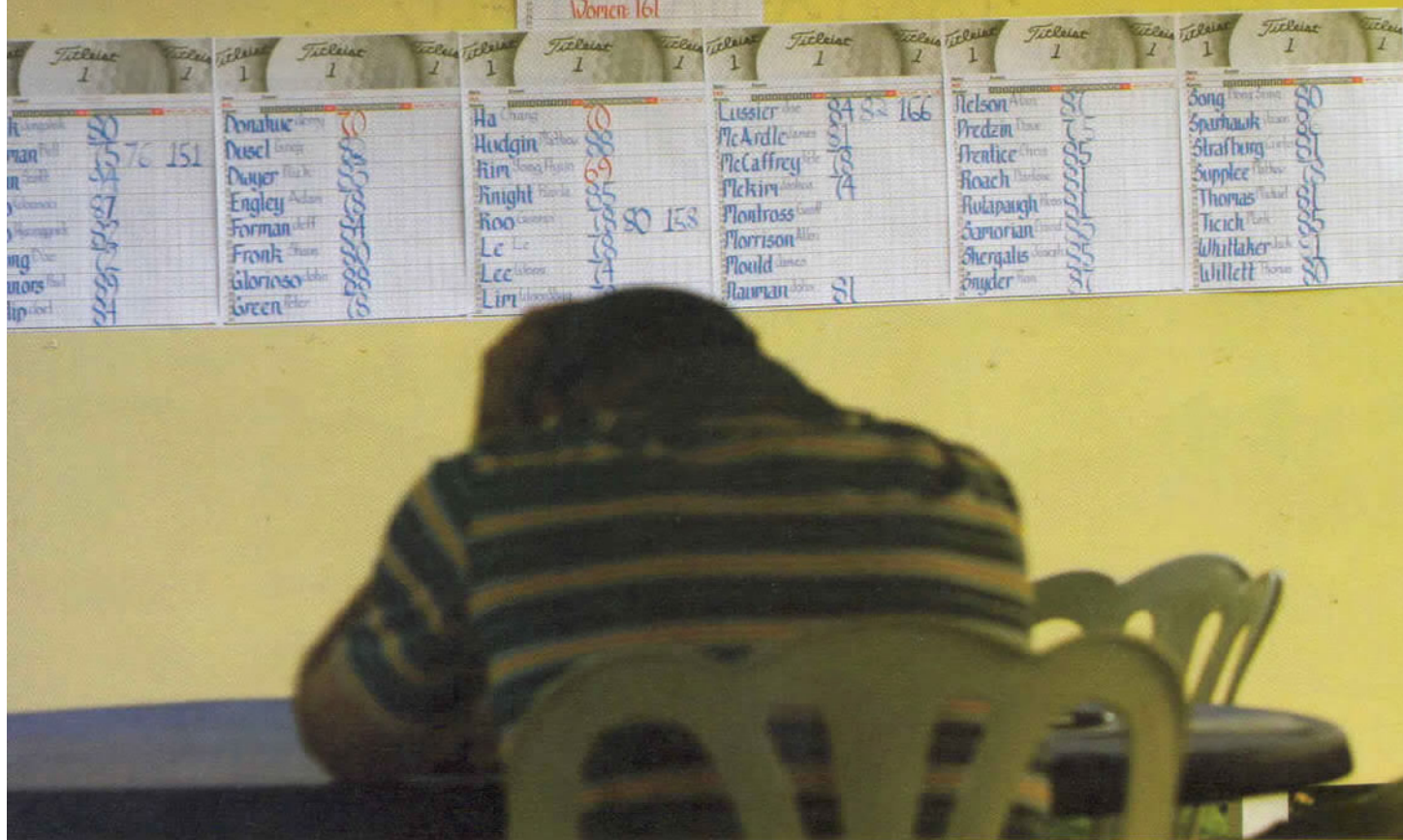


## The Game

The Playing Ability Test



PHOTOGRAPH BY BILL KAMENJAR

# An Aspiring Pro's Measure of Competence

Many professions require competency tests, most of which involve doing the best you can. To become a club golf professional the required exam measures a basic level of playing ability. And that is more difficult than you might think.

By Patrick Jones

With the weight of the world lifting off his shoulders, Brian Fahey stood over a short putt on No. 18 and confidently knocked it in. The friends following his play around the Quail Creek Golf Course in Conway, South Carolina, that April day promptly congratulated him with handshakes, high-fives and pats on the back worthy of a champion.

Fahey, a seven-handicapper, had holed out for a final round that barely broke 80. His 36-hole total flirted with double digits over par. His performance did not equate to touring professional-level play, but, nevertheless, Fahey had won. More precisely, he had overcome. Fahey, at the time a senior in



Coastal Carolina University's Professional Golf Management program, had finally tamed the PGA of America's Playing Ability Test. He had beaten back golf's omnipresent dual demons of self-doubt and tough breaks to triumph in the grueling, soul-searching, one-man tournament that took him 14 tries and almost four years to win.

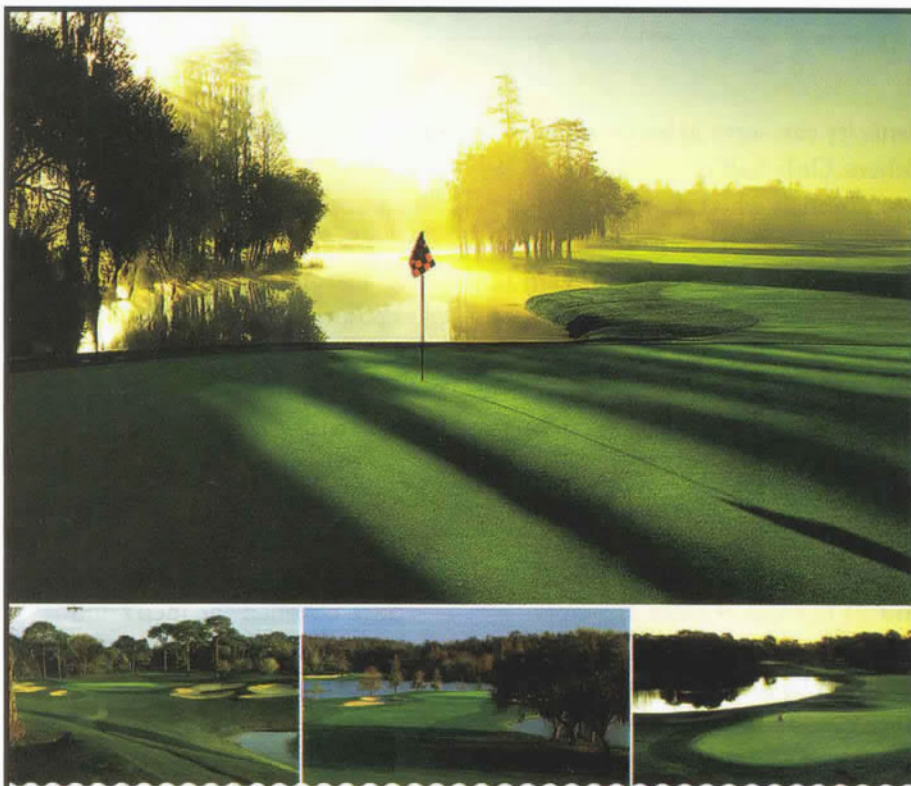
Passing the PAT is a requirement to join the ranks of PGA-certified club professionals – something Fahey desperately desired to do. Equally important, he had to ace the pressure-packed playing exam to be granted his diploma. Fahey had matriculated at Coastal Carolina since 2002 and raced through the academic coursework in less than four years. But passing the PAT proved to be a more intimidating Bear than Jack Nicklaus himself.

Earlier this spring, as his scheduled graduation day menacingly approached, Fahey's woes seemed almost torturous. On his thirteenth attempt, he failed by a single, cruel stroke after missing 12-foot putt for par on the final hole.

"It was very frustrating to take it as many times as I did," says the 24-year-old Fahey. "The toughest part was having my peers and my mentors saying, 'Brian, why haven't you passed this? You have the game to do it.' It was difficult with everyone telling me that I could pass it but I wasn't getting it done. And knowing myself that I could do it, but for some reason I just couldn't seem to get it done.

"It meant that much more when I finally did pass it," says Fahey. "It took a lot longer than I had hoped for. I told myself I was going to do it, and I knew I could do it, so I stuck with it and it finally came together."

Fahey can take comfort in struggling to conquer the PAT. His



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tenacity can serve as an example to others. Only half of all aspiring professionals who take the test eventually pass it – regardless of the number of attempts, according to Chris Hunkler, managing director of Membership Programs for the PGA. One of Hunkler's duties is overseeing the PAT program from the PGA's national headquarters in Port St. Lucie, Florida. He forecast a total of almost 11,000 test attempts for this year. On average, he said, just 21 percent of those attempts will be successful. Statistics provided by his office document that only nine percent of all PAT takers are talented enough to get by on their initial try.

Fahey's 14 attempts before passing miss the mark for record tries by a moon shot. According to Hunkler, a dogged club professional in Florida broke through the PAT barrier on exam No. 56. For those counting, that amounts to 1,008 total test holes. There is no set limit for number of attempts.

The scoring formula for passing the PAT is simple. The PGA takes the course rating, multiplies it by two and adds 15 strokes. For example, the target score for a course with a rating of 71 is  $71 \times 2$  (36 holes) =  $142 + 15 = 157$ . That is the equivalent of shooting 78-79. It is to the discretion of individual PGA sections on scheduling the PAT for 36 holes in a single day, or two 18-hole rounds over two days.

The scoring demands do not appear stringent for a single-digit handicapper. But throw in the pressures of entrance into your chosen livelihood on the line and it

takes on the significance of the bar exam for a lawyer or the CPA exam for an accountant.

Ron Schmid, executive director of the Carolinas PGA, says that lack of exposure to competitive situations is the most common weakness he sees in players who struggle with the PAT.

"For players with experience in stroke-play tournaments, the PAT should be nothing," says Schmid, who played golf at Ohio State and once coached the men's and women's golf teams at Duke

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University. "But it is a whole different scenario for players without that tournament experience when they tee it up for the PAT. All of the sudden there is a target score. They get on the final 18 and they start counting strokes, and that doesn't work well. But in a way, it's what life is all about in the golf business. It's about being able to handle the pressure and how you deal with it."

Ken Jones, director of the PGM program at Campbell University, concurred with Schmid's assessment that a lack of tournament toughness is the most daunting obstacle to aspiring pros stumped by the PAT. As a countermeasure, his students run golf tournaments throughout the school year to give players plenty of opportunities to post scores that "truly count" as preparation for the PAT. The faculty also counsels students having problems with the test to find professional instruction to improve their games, but sometimes even that is not enough.

"A lot of guys don't go out there and putt out everything in their

casual rounds," says Jones. "When you tee it up in the PAT, the score has to count. The more practice they have in making a count, the nerves start to go away eventually. The PAT becomes just like another golf round, or at least it should be."

Jones speaks from personal experience. It took him six attempts before he finally blasted through by nine shots.

"You know the score that you have to post before you hit your first shot," says the PGA's Hunkler. "Sometimes that is a determinant in the process because you play a different game than what you are normally used to playing. That's the reason why we sometimes see people struggling with the PAT."

Schmid advises players to think of the 36-hole PAT as a "marathon and not a sprint" to reduce the anxiety.

"With 15 strokes over 36 holes, you have plenty of room for error. It doesn't have to be perfect," he says. "So if you hit a bad shot you need to put the ball back in play rather than start rapping it through the trees and trying to do things that you have never done under pressure."

Fahey serves as a beacon of hope for those trying to make it in the business. After finally slaying his PAT dragon, his resolve to succeed landed him a full-time position in tournament operations with the Carolinas PGA.

Fahey's travails have slowly faded in his memory bank. He can now reflect back on the PAT process almost with a degree of pleasure.

"To hit that last approach shot on the green with a birdie putt, knowing I was going to pass, and having a lot of my peers and friends there, it was awesome. It was that much more special, especially after trying so hard and so long." ♦