

Pitching Brave

Future baseball Hall-of-Famer Tom Glavine may be known for his pitching arm, but the Atlanta Brave is also fearless with a 5 iron in his hand. PATRICK JONES finds out how starting pitchers spend their time between innings...

IT IS HIGHLY UNLIKELY that Tom Glavine's acceptance speech during a future induction ceremony into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., includes mentions of his driving accuracy or the strengths of his short game.

But, at minimum, a fleeting golf reference by Glavine would be apropos to the culminating words of his baseball career for a number of reasons.

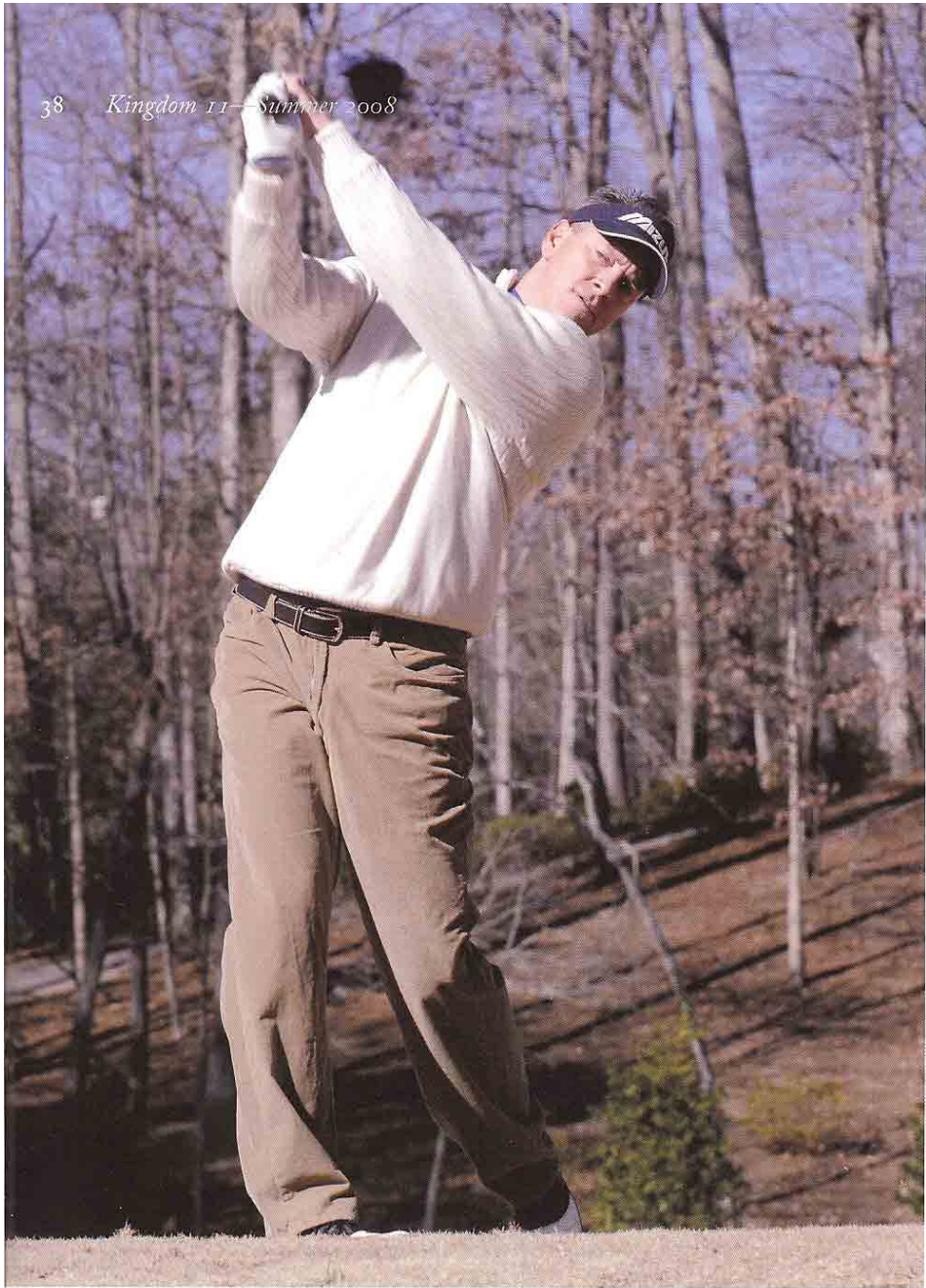
The Atlanta Braves pitcher's enshrinement is a lock upon his retirement and subsequent eligibility for the Hall of Fame. It is a matter of setting the date and time. Many baseball purists speculate that Glavine, a two-time Cy Young award winner, will be immortalized as the last of the sport's 300-game winners, mostly due to the modern game's reliance on middle- and late-inning relief pitching.

Glavine's laser-like pitching control and equally precise emotional management have earned him elite status in baseball's annals. He evolved into a singular talent during his 20-plus year career. But it was his acquired jones for golf,

whether or not he publicly acknowledges it, which provides the polish for his forthcoming bronzed bust.

In the 1990s, Glavine comprised one-third of Major League Baseball's most renowned pitching staffs with fellow Braves aces John Smoltz and Greg Maddux. The trio led the Braves to a World Series championship in 1995 and was the impetus behind many of the team's 14 consecutive divisional championships. The three amigos—all still among the best hurlers in the business—were as tight as buddies on the golf course as they were teammates in the dugout.

As starting pitchers, they have the luxury of playing baseball every fourth or fifth day. They are bench spectators for all but 35 or so games of the 162-game regular season. That leaves plenty of time for golf. And they take full advantage of it. Whether during spring training in Florida, homestands in Atlanta or extended road trips to the West Coast, Glavine, Smoltz and Maddux played many of the finest golf courses across the country.



GLAVINE IS A GOOD NATURED BUT FIERCE ON-COURSE COMPETITOR

"We had that built-in threesome the whole time we were all together (as Braves teammates)," says Glavine. The foursome was filled out "depending on (the pitchers) around over the years." At times that included Steve Avery or Denny Neagle or Kevin Millwood among others. "All kind of guys came in and out. It was great. It just seemed like whoever was here, the five starting pitchers, that all five of us played golf. Whoever was pitching that day was the odd man out and every other day we pretty much had a foursome to go play."

The competition was good-naturedly fierce on the course. Meanwhile, those frequently scheduled four-hour golf outings blended into insightful pitching skull sessions between shots, according to Glavine.

"We went out and had a good time

on the golf course. But playing baseball and pitching is what we do, so inevitably the conversations ended up on baseball, on or our last start or how we were doing as a team. So it was great. You are out on the golf course with guys like Smoltz and Maddux and, of course, you start talking pitching. You are going to learn some things."

Excuse Tom's understatement.

Their shared knowledge and camaraderie on the golf course played a role in producing—entering the 2008 season—a staggering total of 857 wins and seven National League Cy Young awards, a recognition bestowed annually to the most dominant pitcher in each league. Glavine, back with the Braves this season after five years with the New York Mets, owns 303 wins and two awards. Maddux, now with the San

Diego Padres, claims 347 wins and four consecutive Cy Young trophies. Smoltz claims one Cy Young award and 207 wins, plus 154 saves gathered during a three-year stint when he sauntered out of the bullpen as one of the game's most dominant closing pitchers.

Professional baseball's pitching equivalent of Murderer's Row, in essence, coalesced on the golf course.

"Golf was a good way to relax, to get out and get away from everything," says Glavine. "But at the same time you knew you were going to talk shop a little bit. You usually walked away from any golf match having learned something (about pitching) from those guys, or at least talked about something that was going to be helpful for you somewhere down the road."

Growing up in Billerica, Mass., honing his golf game was far down the list of Glavine's priorities. He said he occasionally grabbed his dad's clubs to go hit balls in a field behind his boyhood home. In high school, Glavine played a few

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rounds each summer with friends at the local Billerica Country Club course, which was a nine-hole layout at the time. But golf participation in his youth was, literally and figuratively, mostly hit or miss.

"I was intrigued by (golf) back then," says Glavine. "But it was just a casual thing. I remember thinking my first times out that (playing golf) was a lot harder than you think it would be. You have that image of the ball just sitting on there on the tee with all of that open space and thinking 'I'm going to go hit it there.' It was a much harder sport and a more humbling experience than I anticipated it being."

"I liked golf back then," Glavine adds. "But I didn't have the same interest level as I did with the other two sports."

Those two loves would be baseball and hockey.



Glavine was a prep hockey sensation as a high-scoring center. He was offered a college hockey scholarship and the Los Angeles Kings drafted him in the fourth round of the 1984 National Hockey League draft. Instead, Glavine chose baseball and signed with the Braves, who selected him that same year.

It was during his early years with the Braves organization—Glavine spent three years with the team's minor-league

affiliates—that he discovered his true passion for golf. Glavine was called up to the major league's full time with Atlanta in 1988, the same year that Smoltz joined the team. Maddux was not acquired from the Chicago Cubs until five years later.

"You have downtime playing professional baseball and the opportunity presents itself to play more and more golf," says Glavine. "It's something you become interested in and really want to pursue. Golf provides a nice way to get out and relax a little bit while still keeping those competitive juices going that you have throughout the whole baseball season. It keeps you in that competitive mode."

With maximized recreational time, Glavine was able to whittle his handicap down to as low as a 2, but says his median range is a 6.

Anyone who has watched Glavine pitch would likely choose adjectives like easy, graceful, natural and unforced to describe his fluid delivery. He gets batters out more with harnessed guile than unbridled power.

That ingrained kinetic smoothness seamlessly translates into his golf game.

"When people play golf with me, and they know me as a pitcher and then they see me as a golfer, I hear the comment a lot that my golf game mirrors the way that I pitch," says Glavine. "People look at my delivery as a pitcher and it looks very effortless, and

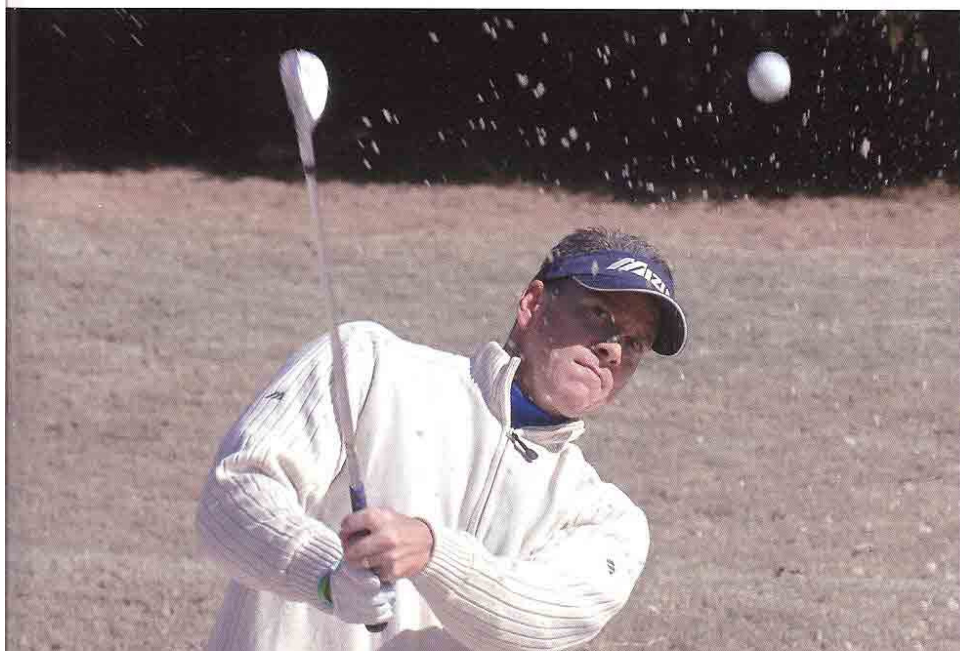
my golf swing is very similar. I am not one of these guys that tries to hit the ball as far as he can. I try to have some combination of power and accuracy, which, like everybody, some days it is better than others. It looks effortless, but there is a lot of emphasis on trying to execute what I am trying to do under control versus trying to overpower and overmatch the game, be it the golf course or the (baseball) hitter."

Glavine said there are numerous other transferable skills between the golf course and the pitcher's mound that he relies on. Most golfers could learn valuable lessons adhering to the measured strategies and emotional mindsets employed by one of this generation's athletic luminaries.

"I look at a golf hole and try to figure out how I am going to attack that hole and execute my game plan," says Glavine. "That means knowing what I do well and what I don't do well and trying to stay away from getting into trouble by trying to make shots that I am not really capable of making, just like I do on the pitcher's mound. You

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SIMILAR TO HIS PITCHING, GLAVINE POSSESSES AN EFFORTLESS GOLF SWING



try to get beat (in baseball) with your number one or your number two pitch, not with your number three or your number four pitch. And the same is true for me on the golf course. If I am going to make a mistake, I am going to try to make the mistake hitting the shot that I think that I can hit, not pulling off the shot that I think that I can maybe hit one out of a hundred times."

Glavine said one of his golfing highlights, and most knee-knocking experiences, was being paired with Arnold Palmer at the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic Celebrity Pro-Am Tournament. "As a professional athlete, there are not a lot of things that you get nervous about, or feel like you can't keep your emotions

under control about," says Glavine, who coolly helped clinch the final game of the 1995 World Series with the baseball world watching.

"But I tell you, knowing beforehand that I was going to get an opportunity to play with Arnold in that kind of venue, that is the kind of thing you lose sleep over. But it was fun. The great thing about it is that (Arnie) is so revered and so popular, and then when you get the chance to play with him you realize what a down-to-earth guy he is. It was really a cool experience having the opportunity to play with him and see what he is like as a person and see just how loved he is by the fans of golf."

Glavine may or may not choose to give golf its kudos when he is at

the podium in Cooperstown at a yet-to-be-determined date, but the sport has played an essential role in his rise to baseball stardom. It is a close bond with golf that he plans on cultivating well beyond his retirement from professional sports.

"That is the great thing about golf," says Glavine. "It is a sport that you can play for a lot of years. That's the beauty of having different sets of tees and having handicaps is that you can get out and have an even match based on those things with virtually anybody. That is something that I look forward to continuing being a big part of my life as I get older—to just get out there and enjoy the game and enjoy the golf course." ■

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TOM GLAVINE

FACTFILE

Born: March 25, 1966

Hometown: Billerica, Mass.

Current handicap: 6

Best-ever handicap: 2

Best score: Even-par 71 and even-par 72 during Atlanta Braves spring training in Orlando (he can't recall the course names)

Holes in one: 0

Favorite courses: Augusta National; Pebble Beach Golf Links; Cypress Point Golf Club; Spyglass Hill Golf Course; The Olympic Golf Club; San Francisco Golf Club; Pine Valley Golf Club; Merion Golf Club; Oakmont Country Club

Club memberships: Country Club of the South, Alpharetta, Ga.; Hawks Ridge Golf Club, Ball Ground, Ga.; The Cliffs at Keowee Vineyards, Sunset, S.C.

In the bag: All Mizuno woods and irons; Titleist Scotty Cameron putter; Titleist Pro V1 golf balls

Most memorable foursomes

included: Tiger Woods, John Smoltz and Steve Avery; John Daly and Fuzzy Zoeller