

IT'S SMALL'S WORLD AFTER ALL

A 20-YEAR PGA PROFESSIONAL, MIKE SMALL REMAINS ONE OF THE PGA'S DOMINANT PERFORMERS

By Bob Denney

HE DISGUISES THE PAIN THAT INVADES HIS SPINE WHEN HE WALKS DOWN A FAIRWAY. WALKING, Mike Small says, is when he feels his best. For more than a decade, the 44-year-old defending PGA Professional National Champion has nursed an inflamed disc in his back. When you combine the demands of serving as the University of Illinois men's golf coach, you find a man who paces himself and unconsciously follows one Clint Eastwood "Dirty Harry" mantra: *Man's got to know his limitations.*



There are few limitations in Small's world, a career portfolio that includes coaching the past two Big Ten Conference team champions; capturing the 2005 and 2009 PGA Professional National Championships and remaining the most dominant player in Illinois PGA history.

Born in Aurora, Ill., Small grew up in Danville, some 37 miles east of the University of Illinois campus in Champaign. The orange and blue Fighting Illini percolates through the Small family bloodline.

His father, Bill, was captain of the Fighting Illini's 1963 Big Ten Champion men's basketball team. In 1988, Small finished second behind teammate, and current PGA Tour star, Steve Stricker on the school's Big Ten Conference golf championship team. In 1990, Small's brother, Andy, was an infielder on the Big Ten Champion baseball squad. Both Mike and Andy followed their father by serving as captains of their respective sports teams.

Small turned professional in 1990, competed on several tours, including the Nationwide Tour, where he won two events out of 97 career starts.

He joined the PGA Tour in 1995, earning his card for one full season (1998), where he tied for ninth in the Bell Canadian Open. This past February, in his 56th career PGA Tour start, he tied for 17th in the Mayakoba Classic in Cancun, Mexico.

In 2000, Small's career journey came full circle. He returned to Champaign to become Illinois' head coach. Over the past decade, he has resurrected the Illini program. His 2009 team was ranked No. 1 in the nation for part of the year.

For the past decade, Small has been

unstoppable in Illinois PGA events – winning eight Illinois PGA Championships and four Illinois Opens.

As a Division I men's golf coach, Small's career is a balancing act that involves year-round recruiting, alumni relations work, rules and administration.

"It is a lot of time management. I really stress that a lot in my life," says Small. "The main point is I'm trying to be a dad to my two teenage boys. It's a time in their life when they need me. It's very difficult.

"In a Division I program, a head coach has a lot of responsibilities, not just coaching golf. Maybe that is why I play better. I'm not so consumed with my golf game that it beats me up. I take it as it comes."

When Small heads on the road with his team, he may bring along one club, a 6- or 7-iron, just to get in practice shots for 20 minutes.

Small's coaching life, keeps him in the game. "Even if I'm not playing, I'm in the game with them," he explains. "I'm watching good golf. These are all good players, scratch handicap players. They are trying to play at the next level, hopefully. I'm walking with them and we're talking course management. Mentally I'm never out of it, and am always engaged in competition."

Small has the best of both worlds – a supportive family and a supportive employer.

"I have a great family that understands what it means to have someone who is involved in the game, in coaching, and what it means as far as time spent away from home," says Small. "And, I owe a lot to the University of Illinois. When I took this job, I wanted to leave it better than when I found it. I think the program is in a good situation now. They are supporting me. They understand the value of me playing and the attention it brings. It is a fair trade. I try to find a balance, and that's what I try to teach my players." ■

PGA Professional Mike Small has achieved a solid balance between competing for championships and coaching the University of Illinois men's golf team (inset).

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