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Low-key PGA stars fill tables at local restaurants

Susan R. Pollack / The Detroit News

Unfortunately for golfer Brad Dean, his "perfect spot" this week was in a popular Birmingham restaurant and not on the course at Oakland Hills Country Club. On Thursday, the Michigan club pro shot an ugly 16-over-par in his debut round at the PGA Championship.

A few days earlier, an exuberant Dean, director of golf at Crystal Mountain Resort in Thompsonville near Traverse City, dined with friends at 220, the lively eatery on Merrill Street in Birmingham. It's shaping up as one of the after-links gathering spots for the hordes of pro golfers, media crews, fans and sponsors in town for the big event.

"I probably hit more golf balls on Monday than any single day in the last five years, so I certainly worked up an appetite," says Dean, who carbed up at 220 on penne pasta with fresh vegetables while his caddy, Korey Mahoney, enjoyed the whitefish. "But even more, it's good to just sit down for a few minutes and truly enjoy this incredible (PGA tournament) experience.

"It was the perfect spot."

All around northern Oakland County, but especially in Birmingham and around the golf course at Telegraph and Maple, bars and restaurants are buzzing with sightings of golf celebrities, touring pros, media crews and assorted groupies.

Only problem is, with the absence of uber-star Tiger Woods, few of the PGA golfers stand out to most local restaurant managers and staff amid the sea of golf hats, polo shirts and shorts that are the week's uniform du jour. After all, golfers, even pros, don't have the telltale height of pro basketball stars, the heft of pro football players or, sorry, the teeth of pro hockey stars.

"I don't know golfers really, unless they're Tiger Woods -- I don't even know who the favorites are," admits Teri Neault, day manager at Northern Lakes Seafood Company in Bloomfield Hills, where the bar has been jumping all week with tournament sponsors and golf fans but no observable stars.

One notable exception on Metro Detroit's recognition-meter is Vijay Singh, fresh from winning the Bridgestone Invitational World Golf Championship last Sunday. He was spotted dining Monday night at Outback Steakhouse in Rochester Hills.

"He was with somebody else in golf attire and they had a little booth to themselves," says Phil Churchill, the restaurant's manager. "He ordered the rack of lamb. People definitely recognized him, but they left him alone. Not one person approached him, which was nice."

Over at Beau Jack's in Bloomfield Hills, across Telegraph Road from Oakland Hills golf course, one of the waitresses reported serving Singh and another famous golfer, Phil Mikelson, on separate occasions this week. But Bob Vargo, manager of the tavern/piano bar, says he's not so sure about that. "Rumor has it, but I can't confirm it," he says.

However, Gary Cochran, Beau Jack's' owner, says touring pro Fred Couples dropped by for dinner. "Freddie Couples was in with his wife Monday or Tuesday night," Cochran, says, and adds, "I see customers going to tables for autographs, that's how I know."

Nearby, at Hogan's, where the walls are lined with photos of golf greats such as Ben Hogan, Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer, this week's crowd included several familiar faces.

"(Touring pro) Justin Leonard was in for dinner on Tuesday, I believe, with a party of seven or eight," reports Rick Bochenek, the restaurant's owner. "He ordered the Pasta del Casa. And on Wednesday night we had Natalie (Gulbis) from the Golf Channel, and the whole crew, the producer and that British guy with the gray goatee. Four of them I recognized from TV."

Elsewhere around town, touring pro Jim Estes really got around this week. He was spotted dining at Mitchell's Fish Market in Birmingham; Moose Preserve Bar & Grill in Bloomfield Hills and the new Ocean Prime in Troy. Another less-known golfer, Brian Gay, dined at Forte in Birmingham, according to a manager.

In the past, Dick O'Dow's in Birmingham has been popular with the European golfers, who partied there after winning the 2004 Ryder Cup and are expected for a return visit.

And Big Rock Chophouse in Birmingham is gearing up for a big, celebrity-studded weekend, having already welcomed a golf media group from Turner Broadcasting on Tuesday night, says Vera Day Rizer, general manager.

"Based on what happened last time during the Ryder Cup, I entertained all of them, including Tiger. All of them were here for dinner. They took over the Got Rocks lounge privately, and they all had a good time."

And while she declined to detail specific plans, Day Rizer says, "That kind of thing will definitely repeat itself. They all know where we are."

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