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Profile

Chip Sullivan

A Pro's Choice

It was 1999, and Chip Sullivan had to make a decision. He had already been to the "The Show," having played in the big leagues for one season. He had made the mistakes and thought to himself, "If I could just get back there, next time things would be different. I would understand the pressure. I could make it on the PGA Tour."

Reflecting today, Sullivan knows he made the right choice. That dream just wasn't meant to be. Instead, he passed up the chance to lead the

exciting life of a touring professional and chose the comfort and safety of a club professional's job. He decided to return to the Roanoke area where his new wife Kari grew up and become the head golf pro at Ashley Plantation Golf Club in Daleville, Va. His legacy now is not a bunch of struggles – or successes – on the PGA Tour. Instead, it is one of a family, a somewhat different career, and a course.

Chip Sullivan, a native of upstate New York, started his professional golf career in 1993 at Hanging Rock golf course in Salem, Va. As the assistant golf pro, he was a southern single man in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia that was more conducive for families. Friends said he was not happy.

"At first I wasn't sure about the place," Sullivan says.

But that all changed when he met Kari Hall, the co-host of a popular morning radio show in the valley. The two connected. Kari brought purpose to his life.

"As it turned out, I hit the jackpot," he says.

"Who would have thought I would meet the girl of my dreams in this place?"

Love and his golf game blossomed.

In 1996 he won the Middle Atlantic PGA Championship and was Player of the Year in the section. At the end of the year he qualified for the PGA Tour by finishing third at the PGA Tour's qualifying school tournament in Santa Barbara, Calif.

On the big tour, he entered 27 events and made

11 cuts. He even finished in the top five in driving distance. "I had the time of my life," he says. "Kari and I were newlyweds with no kids. We got to go to all these great places and be around the greatest golfers in the world."

Unfortunately, he also found why the PGA Tour uses the tag line of, "These guys are good." It was an eye opener.

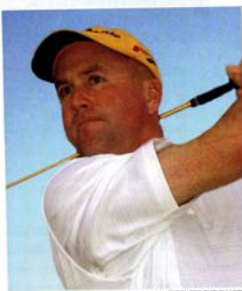
"The first realization was when I played in the Bob Hope," he says. "I

played pretty well, shooting 12-under par. Only the winner shot 20-under and I lost by eight shots."

From then he worked on his game trying to get to the next level. "I took lessons from anyone who would listen, but that confused me even more," he says.

At the end of the season Sullivan earned \$41,019, far from enough to make the top 125 and retain his tour card. Thinking back, Sullivan is now more philosophical about the experience.

"As in any business, I think you need to have



ASHLEY PLANTATION PRO CHIP SULLIVAN

a few years experience before you can be successful," he says. "But asking to do it in less than a year, to be successful at something where you're really wet behind the ears as a rookie, it was a tough calling for me."

After a year as the head pro at Chanticleer Golf Course in Greenville, S.C., Sullivan went back to Q-School. He just missed requalifying for the PGA Tour but earned his card for the Nationwide Tour. That set him up for "the choice."

The decision, according to Sullivan, was not difficult. His wife had just given birth to their daughter Kalley.

"There is a big difference between the Nationwide and the PGA Tour," says Sullivan. "On the PGA Tour through endorsement and one-day exhibitions you can have enough money to travel and live well. I had a new family to think about now."

The decision was made even easier when local developer A. R. Overbay asked Sullivan to become the head professional at Ashley Plantation.

"Kari's from the area and we both wanted to get back here," he says. "I thought it was a good fit. So I gave up playing on the Nationwide Tour to take the job, and I haven't looked back."

As his home base, Ashley Plantation also provides grounds for Sullivan to continue a somewhat modified competitive schedule. Since making the decision to not be a touring pro, he has been active in section events. He has won over 70 tournaments as a professional, including the Carolina's PGA Section Championship, the Middle Atlantic PGA Section Championship, the South Carolina PGA Section Championship, 2004 Maryland Open and the Myrtle Beach Open, a stop on the Hooter's Tour. Last year he was low professional at the Virginia State Open.

In 2004 he placed third at the Club Professional's Championship. That

finish meant he was invited to participate in the 86th PGA Tournament at Whistling Straights. With his father-in-law on the bag, just playing the last major on the PGA Tour would have been tough enough, but Sullivan had outside pressures.

"It's week I will never forget," he said at the time. "It's been a fun week. It's been a hard week. It's been an emotional week."

While playing, Sullivan had to try to put out of his mind thoughts of his ailing sister, Kerry Anne, who was suffering from fatal liver disease and had already surpassed doctors' expectations by living to see her brother play in the tournament. In addition, he had to put off thoughts of his wife, Kari, who was days away from giving birth to their second child. Through it all, he played great.

"I just had to keep my emotions in check and focus on what I was doing and just play golf," he said after the

final round.

The results showed. He was the first club professional to finish under par at the PGA Championship since 1969 with a one-under total of 287 for the tournament.

With Sullivan by her side, Kerry Anne passed away the day after the tournament. He then was with Kari when she gave birth to their son, Colby. This past year Sullivan was inducted into the Roanoke Valley Hall of Fame. As head golf pro at Ashley Plantation, Sullivan feels he has the best of both worlds.

"I've been able to promote golf in the valley through my playing," he says. "Hopefully, I've given some things back to the community by working with the juniors and establishing a whole new club."

And it was all made possible through a bold decision seven years ago. *

— Peter Smolens

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