

Tiger tale



Left: Huntsville, Alabama Branch 462 retired member Mike Eckley (l) with golf superstar Tiger Woods.

Below: Trump National Golf Club on the Palos Verdes Peninsula just south of Los Angeles.



Retired carrier meets living legend

Last fall, newly retired letter carrier Mike Eckley was standing at the 10th hole tee of the Trump National golf course in Southern California when a familiar figure walked up, extended his hand, and said, “Hi, I’m Tiger Woods.”

Eckley, a member of Huntsville, Alabama Branch 462, introduced himself, but declined the handshake. “Back home,” he told the golf superstar, “when we meet someone we like, we give them a big hug.”

Right on cue, Woods spread his arms and smiled, Eckley said, “and we locked it up.”

How the NALC member went from the Heart of Dixie to a swanky suburban Los Angeles golf course—it costs a minimum \$275 to play 18 holes—is a tale of both tenacity and plain luck.

While idly playing with his computer last summer, Eckley came across a contest called “Tee It Up with Tiger” sponsored by Nike and The Golf Channel. The top prize: one hole of instructional golf with the legendary Tiger Woods.

Eckley, an avid golfer, didn’t hesitate. “You were allowed only one entry a day,” he said, “so every day for about six weeks, I entered.”

Shortly after the entry deadline, Eckley received a special silver golf ball in the mail along with a notice that he thought meant he had moved on to the next step in the contest. In September, however, a phone call revealed just how lucky the 30-year carrier was—a contest official explained the silver ball meant he was one of the contest’s 24 winners.

“He said, ‘If everything checks out, you’ll be flying out to Los Angeles to play golf with Tiger,’” Eckley recalled. After clearing a simple background check and applying his signature to some liability and publicity releases, the 56-year-old carrier collected his ticket to L.A.

A week before the flight to Southern California, a producer from The Golf Channel called in search of “four ‘characters’ to focus on for a special series of shows about the contest,” Eckley said. “As it turned out, I wound up being one of the guys they focused on.” (The series aired in late November.)

Eckley traveled to L.A. in mid-October and the morning after his arrival, the 24 finalists boarded a bus for the Trump National links, located on a hillside overlooking the Pacific Ocean. “It was stunning—and very tough,” Eckley said.

Tee time with Tiger

It wasn’t until the 10th hole that they met the No. 1 golfer in the world. “As luck would have it, my foursome was the first one to get there,” the carrier said, “and that’s when I hugged him.”

By chance, Eckley was the first to tee up and he was nervous under Tiger’s watchful eye. “It’s hard to hit a driver when your knees are knocking together,” he observed. “The hole was a dogleg left, but my shot did a dogleg right.”

A couple of strokes later, Eckley reached the green. “With the pin on his shoulder,” he said, “Tiger told me to putt to a spot that he was pointing out.” Despite some reservations about the shot, “a little voice told me, ‘Mike, don’t—under any circumstances—ask Mr. Woods if he is sure about this putt.’”

Sure enough, the ball broke right toward the hole, just as Woods predicted. “I guess he knows what he’s talking about after all,” Eckley said, laughing.

Later, as he flew back to Huntsville, Eckley was reflective. “We were told by one of the ladies from Nike that there are about 24 million golfers in the United States, meaning each of us winners represented about a million golfers,” he said. “I’m just thankful to Tiger for having made me personally feel like one in a million.” ☒