

The Sky's the Limit

Frank Esposito spent thirty years getting ready for his shot at the Tour. Is the Tour ready for him?

BY RAY TENNENBAUM

It's the day after Christmas, and to look at the barren pro shop at Brooklake CC in Florham Park, either Santa's elves ransacked the place in a last-minute spree or someone just got fired: a hundred naked clothes hangers dangle from the racks, and not a single piece of equipment is on display except for a pile of unloved Naugahyde carry bags that no one is in a hurry to carry away.

It may look like a club pro's nightmare, but it's a dream come true for Frank Esposito. After 25 years teaching in northern New Jersey, the 51-year-old East Brunswick native — a dominant force in Garden State and Met Area tournaments the last few years — is heading to the Champions Tour. He won the Tour's National Qualifying Tournament in November by four strokes, leading wire-to-wire, a week after he captured the Senior PGA Professional National Championship by the same margin. The Q-School victory earned Esposito a full exemption to 2015 Champions Tour events and \$30,000 (to go along with the previous week's prize of \$20,000), and also a place in golf history as the only player to win those two events in the same year.

Excited as he is, Esposito is leaving a job he had for 15 years at Brooklake. "As a club pro, you've always got your day mapped out. I had a good thing here, and you get comfortable. I've developed so many friendships with my members over the years, I'm going to miss that."

Given his local dominance the last few years — victories in the 2013 New Jersey State Golf Association Open, last year's

NJPGA Match Play Championship, the NJPGA Head Pro Championship, and the NJPGA Senior Open — it seems fair to ask why this particular "overnight sensation" didn't reach the national stage twenty years ago. Not that you'll get much of an answer from him. "That's a good question," he says, before allowing that he never much enjoyed traveling. On the other hand, the people who know him the best — even if they aren't completely sure what held him back — are certain he's poised to make his mark on the over-50 Tour just as longtime club-pros-turned-tour-stars Jim Albus and Dana Quigley did. Says his coach, Len Siter, "The only thing he's lacked is confidence, and he has that now. If he plays 20 events, I think he'll win one." Old friend and confidant Charlie Cowell, director of instruction at Crestmont, has no doubt Esposito will compete with the marquee names on Tour: "Because of how far Frank hits the ball, and his touch around the greens. And if he gets close to the top, I think Frank has a savoir faire about him that is going to be very magnetic with the public. When the guys play with him — when Freddie Couples plays with him, when Bernhard Langer plays with him — they're going to say, 'Where has this guy been?'"



Esposito chats with Jim McGovern on the first tee at the 2013 Met Open while his caddy looks on.

He started playing with his dad—Frank Sr., a customs broker—on Staten Island when he was nine, and soon they were competing in small money games at Silver Lake. When he was 12, his family moved to Old Bridge; feeling out of place in new surroundings, he found solace in the self-reliant discipline golf offered at Glenwood, his father's club, where he spent most every day. "In the summertime, I would be dropped off at 8 in the morning, and I'd walk and play all day, and my dad would show up at 6 o'clock after work and we'd play again." When he was 13, he won a caddy tournament in Maplewood with a 75; he credits that victory with inspiring him to start practicing seriously. He got into Rutgers on a golf scholarship and made honorable mention All-American in '84 and '85, when the Scarlet Knights made it to the NCAA championships; he was low amateur and tied for ninth at the 1984 Met Open and won the 1985 MGA Intercollegiate individual title. He turned professional in 1986, working as an assistant at Glenwood, Montammy, Crestmont and Shackamaxxon and heading down to Florida for mini-tour season, where he roomed with Charlie Cowell.

Both joined Bloomingdale Golfers Club outside Tampa, where owner Bobby Strickland offered memberships to up-and-coming young pros. The traveling and grinding didn't agree with Esposito, who at twenty-something was—well, discovering life, while one or two other guys at Blooming-

dale had another priority. "You could see where their focus was," he recalls, using one of his favorite words. "I remember Charlie Cowell asking Lee Janzen, 'How does it feel to know you're going to make the tour?'"

Esposito's natural ability was plain to see. Len Siter, currently Mountain Ridge Country Club's head professional, also traveled the Florida mini-tours in the mid-'80s and played against him in Jersey as the two started their careers as club assistants. "There were guys that were winning more, but no one had the game that Frank had. No one could drive the ball, hit the ball, [excel at the] short game the way he did. He didn't win a lot back then, but nobody had those raw skills. If you wanted to win an assistant's event, you had to beat Frank—him and Charlie Cowell in my opinion back then, they were the guys to beat."

Cowell, the 1992 New Jersey PGA Player

of the Year and winner of the 1994 Met Open, twice missed Q School qualifying by a stroke—but it was his friend's stellar gifts that provided a reality check: "Probably the reason that I quit chasing the dream of playing golf for a living was I felt like I would have to spend every hour of the day working on my game to possibly have a chance, where I always felt Frank had special talent."

In part on the strength of winning the New Jersey Open in 1999, he landed the head professional's job at Brooklake. He was uncertain if he should take it, and actually asked Mario Fastiggi, the Brooklake General Manager who'd offered him the job, for advice. "I said, 'Frank, this is an opportunity you may never get again. Do you have any other head pro jobs that you could pick from?'" Fastiggi recalls. "He said, 'Do you want me to be honest? I really don't.' I said, 'What do you have to lose?' It was the first opportunity for him to actually own the business, and he was nervous."

Esposito on Q-School:

You see guys that you grew up watching play—Steve Jones won the US Open—at the same Tour school you're in, and you're—not awestruck, but look at these guys, they've done this for their whole life. So when I won I was a little shocked, I was a little 'I can't believe this actually happened.'

That last round playing in Tour school is excruciating. Every time you look up, you see a tree.

I tried not to think about the consequences, like 'This is life-changing, this is my life and if I don't make it what am I gonna do?' My attitude was, 'You know what? Knock on wood, it's not life or death, let's just enjoy it and see what happens.'

The weather wasn't great and it was cold and you're nervous, and then you realize—if it was easy, everybody'd do it. You know it's not going to be you go out and win by twenty, so you might as well suck it up and enjoy it.



Esposito with Gene Westmoreland at the 1985 MGA Intercollegiate, and as low amateur at the 1984 Met Open.



Shop duties slowed his competitive career in the early 2000s. “That’s one of those things that happens when you move from assistant to head pro,” says Esposito. “It takes time to get used to it, you’re definitely working more hours and practicing less — the playing’s not the top priority. So yeah, the first few years are difficult.”

The golf swing Esposito will take on Tour was the result of years of hard work alongside his longtime friends and colleagues. Len Siter has been coaching him since the mid-’90s, and the two have spared few resources in their odyssey, using state-of-the-art technology including kinematic sequencing and 3-D imaging technology to isolate its critical parts. Driven more by results than philosophy, Siter focused on preserving and enhancing what works, while eliminating the occasional foul ball off the tee. “When a guy drives the ball 325 yards there’s stuff going on in that swing that not many golfers can do, and that’s a good thing — we can’t lose that, and we’ve got to figure out how to make that work. I don’t want to take one of his strengths and make it a weakness just because it’s going to look better. And we go back and forth on this — he wants me to tidy that backswing up, so when I go to Florida with him in a couple of weeks, I’ll tidy it up but I’m not going to take away the dynamicness of it, I’m not.”

Esposito admits, “I’m a student of the game, and like every other golfer I can be my own worst enemy, always looking to tweak it here or make it better there.”

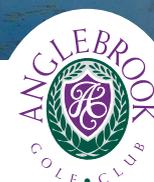
Mike Diffley, longtime head professional at Pelham CC, remembers when he was playing for St. John’s, he and Frank “hit it off tremendously” in college matches, “a couple of Irish/Italian goombahs.” Diffley says Esposito was a “maniac” off the tee back then. Nowadays, nearly 35 years later, “he’s fit, he’s still very strong, he knows how to play much better now, he’s smarter now. He knows he doesn’t have to hit it 340 yards, he only has to hit it 300 yards — and he still can hit it 300 yards. He’s become a seasoned player.” Diffley is anything but grudging in his appreciation of Esposito’s ability. “He’s the best ballstriker in the country for his age. If you went out on the range on a senior tour event, and you were watchin’ these guys hit balls, and you didn’t know their names, he would be the guy you’d stop and watch. You would say, “Wow, look at that guy.””

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Len Siter and Esposito at the 2014 PGA Championship.

Esposito approached Diffley on the practice green before the National Senior Club Pro Championship in which they were both competing, and asked him to watch him putt. Diffley has carved out a speciality as a mental coach for tournament players, often giving them a custom-tailored bit of self-talk to help them through the round. “So I watch him, and he’s hittin’ it perfect,” Diffley recalls. “He says, ‘I’m a little uptight.’ I looked at him for fifteen minutes and gave him some

attitudes — a phrase, a mantra, part of his pre-shot routine. And he looks at me and says, ‘That is exactly what I need.’”

Diffley came in after a so-so round and looked up at the scoreboard, “and I see ‘Frank Esposito 64’ and just start laughin’... we go back and forth with texts and after he wins, he tells me, ‘I can’t believe how much you helped me, it was perfect... what do I do next week?’”

“I said, ‘You know, Frank, if you’re going to think about changing that formula now,

you’re not as smart as I thought you were!’”

“He gave me a positive mental image,” says Esposito. “Didn’t say anything about my stroke, just positive images. And I never putted better. It’s amazing the power of just believing in yourself and not letting certain things bother you. Surrounding yourself with people that know the right thing to say, and are positive and believe in you — even if you don’t believe in yourself — definitely helps.”

“What everybody likes about him is he’s so humble,” says Len Siter, and sure enough you are apt to find Esposito easy-going and sociable and full of gratitude — until the subject turns to himself and he clams up. (“To a fault, he’s the worst promoter of himself,” says Siter.) He acknowledges that in part he split with his wife, Donna, in June 2013 because of the difficulty he had overcoming his own guarded nature: “One of the reasons we got divorced was I was miserable when I played lousy. And once I leave the golf course, I leave it, and I’ve always had a tough time talking about it.” Parents of three sons, the pair reconciled last summer, and typically of Esposito, he takes the long view: “Everything happens for a reason,” he says, using one of his pet phrases. “It’s been rocky. We both grew in the last couple of years, being single. We had to work on communication, and other things.

“It’s like we’re a team now. Which I think it definitely helps, being a team, she’s helping me with the letters [to sponsors, tournament directors, others].” He pauses, then says, a little mischievously. “I gotta give her a title.”

Mrs. Champions Tour Winner will do nicely. ■