

GOLF COACH

Mickey was puzzled. Why would a golf coach – of all people – smoke a pipe? But that’s exactly what the Ridegfield Coach was doing. There he was in his blue school jacket with a red buffalo emblazoned on the front puffing away. You’d think this guy – whose name was something like Spalding – was lounging in a pub in Oxford, England, not in the coffee shop at the Peabody Public Links.

He puffed and frowned and then he leaned forward almost knocking over his Styrofoam cup as he fiddled with the packets of ketchup. “Mickey,” he looked straight ahead. “All of us coaches were surprised to see they named you head golf coach at Forest. You’ve got quite an act to follow, my boy. Coach Gus set the bar awfully high. What about Simmons? Wasn’t he next in line?”

Gus was Coach Gus Walters. Three weeks ago, he was driving a golf cart out to the 8th hole to check up on one of his freshman hot shots. On way there, he had a massive heart attack and toppled out of the cart onto the grass. He died next to a fairway bunker. Two days later, twenty-eight year old Mickey Moran was named to replace him.

Mickey looked back at Coach Spaulding, whose teams almost always lost out to Forest. “Charlie Simmons left teaching to sell insurance in Santa Fe. I was named Guy’s assistant coach and now I’m the head coach, what can I say?”

“Ever coach golf before? You’re a young guy, I hear you teach English to fuck-ups.” Now Spaulding was scooping his pipe into an oversized baggy filled with tobacco, K-Mart.”

“I coached at a Catholic school in Rochester, and I’ve played golf all my life. I think I can do it.” Last month, he had told the same lies to the Athletic Director, who had interviewed him for the assistant’s job. The A.D. was seriously skeptical but what was he going to do? He needed someone else to collect the scorecards and ride the bus with the younger golfers. Assistant golf coaches were basically a flunky’s job.

And that had been perfect for Mickey. The school required that teacher’s participate in one activity. Now he could quit as assistant drama director, which had called for endless conversations with sensitive young thespians. He’d be much happier

snoozing at the golf course. But now with Gus gone, his snoozing days were over – indeed, they had never started.

Time to go outside and see how his guys were doing in today’s “September Scramble.” Eight teams competed in this early tournament of the year. The winner usually went on to claim the state. For the last five years Gus’s team had done just that.

Mickey slid through the crowd and stared up at the big board on the 18th green. On it were the individual scores and the team totals. In charge, carrying a blue marker pen and barking orders was Ben Flanigan, coach of the host team and minor figure in the world of high school golf. Mickey squinted up at the numbers. Earlier in the day, Forest had been trailing but moving up; but now he could see they had not caught up. In fact the team was coming out third. He turned around into a cloud of smoke and the grinning face of Coach Spalding, who placed his freckled hand on Mickey’s shoulder. “Well, we finally did it. We finally beat you guys. Watch out for us this year.”

Mickey slipped free and made his way to his players glumly grouped by the putting green. In the middle was the captain, Peter Van Arsdale, a tall blond kid who next year at this time would be playing for Duke University. “Not to worry, guys,” Mickey called out cheerfully. “You played well. It wasn’t our day, but this is just for practice anyway. We can talk about it on the bus.”

“We’re not taking the bus,” Van Arsdale snapped. “My dad’s driving us back in his van.” Earlier he had met Mr. Van Arsdale. He was a big guy with a stiff handshake and a scowl – not your typical father as far as Mickey could tell.

So Mickey rode back alone. He didn’t even bother to congratulate the other coaches. He slumped down in front of the bus and accepted a beer from the driver. He had hoped the fellow, an old timer named Gerard, might be sympathetic. After all, how could Mickey be blamed for what his players did? What could Gus or anyone have done? But all the driver said was Van Arsdale’s father was a “prick with ears.”

“Quit, Mickey. Quit.” Shelly slid a piece of toast between Mickey and the sports page. “The guys are coaches and coaches are scum bags and that’s all there is to it. Quit. We’ve lived together for two years and I’ve never seen you look so miserable. Would you

please quit? You stayed up half the night drinking. Thank God it's the weekend. Would you please quit."

When Mickey first met Shelly at a bar, she proudly described herself as a "simple-minded bitch." No gray areas for her. Nothing lurking beneath the surface. What you see is what you get. If you were an English teacher like Mickey and taught the tough kids, you were OK. If you were a coach, forget it. She popped some more bread into the toaster. She was tall and slim and athletic looking. She might have made a good golfer. But taking up a sport was the last thing Shelly would ever do. Graduate school and substitute teaching took all of her time.

"After the coach died," Mickey said, "I told the athletic department they could appoint someone else if they felt uncomfortable with me in charge. But the A.D. said I was the man and that Gus had told him I would do just fine."

"You're lying," She snapped as she smeared margarine on her toast. She sat down at the table and pushed the paper away. "The phone has started to ring. Mrs. Fleming said that before the match, you should have scheduled a team meeting to pump up the players. Mrs. Walters, who incidentally has a horrible stutter, said 'sssssshould have pppppplayed her son.' And some guy with a foreign loud voice said that YOU'D BETTER SHAKE UP THE LINE UP before the duel meets start. And then Tim somebody or other from the newspaper called all pissed off because you forgot to phone in the scores. It won't be long until that Van Arsdale calls. Christ, what a Neanderthal he is! Mickey, do you have any idea of what you've done to yourself?"

"Look. I'll be fine. All golf coaches do is sit around. The kids all have their own pros. I just decide who plays. I make sure people show up. I go to the meetings with the other coaches. I'll figure it out. Just leave me alone." He suddenly felt very tired.

He walked into the living room and dropped down into his favorite chair. It was gray and worn like the other used furniture that Shelly had picked up in the city. There was a pile of student papers on the floor, but he wasn't going to grade them. There was a science fiction novel he was about to start and some old *New Yorkers* he needed to finish, but he was too tired to read. He stared blankly at the wall and noticed that Shelly had hung up a photo of George Orwell, her favorite author. She was always doing that sort of thing – hanging things up and taking them down without ever asking. Sometimes he

complained, but not today. He got up and walked outside. A bike ride would make him feel better.

Before he went into the living room to join the party, Mickey asked Mrs. Van Arsdale if he could use the bathroom. It was huge, one of the largest he had ever been in. It had two sinks, a large shower and two dressers. Picasso prints covering two walls. Another wall was one huge mirror. Mickey stared into it. Considering the fact that he had been drinking for two days, he looked OK. His hair was sticking up and his clothes were wrinkled, but he was a teacher and that's what he was supposed to look like.

He had been asleep when the phone had rang. "Mickey, this is Beth Van Arsdale, Peter's mom. Sorry to call you so early on Sunday, but his dad and I want to invite you to a party we're having for the team this afternoon. It's something the captain of the family does every year. With Gus dying and all that, we forgot to ask you, but we sure hope you can come. Bring your girlfriend." Mickey said he'd be there, but he'd be coming alone. Shelly at a party with rich people wouldn't be much fun.

The living room was crowded with parents and a few school people. Mickey looked out the window and saw the golf team shooting baskets and sailing Frisbees.

Ed Van Arsdale greeted him with a crushing handshake and led him to the bar where he grabbed a beer and left him with a couple standing nearby. Their son, along with being a good golfer, was a debating champ. "I don't suppose you've had him in class?" the wife asked.

"I don't think so," Mickey laughed, "My students are one step from dropping out."

"Special Ed?" the husband asked.

"We call them At Risk Kids. Special Ed's something else."

"It must be awfully hard work," she said.

"Not really. It's not as hard as it was when I first started." That was true, if nothing else, he had learned how to keep them busy.

"I bet not many golf coaches come from the department."

"I'm the first as far as I know."

He drank another beer and talked for a while with Mrs. Arsdale. She had been a history major at Indiana University. For two years she had taught in the city. She stood a little too close and touched him a little too often. Once she lowered her voice to say that the lady talking to her husband was going through serious therapy.

Mickey was leaving the bar with his third beer when Van Arsdale strode up and put a beefy arm around his shoulder. "Let's go to the study."

He led Mickey into a dark room near the stairwell and gestured for him to sit in a leather couch while he stayed standing. The room had a few bookshelves, one giant TV set and a desk. There were pictures on the wall with Van Arsdale and local celebrities taken at golf courses.

Mr. Van Arsdale stood over Mickey and started talking. "My guess is that you don't like me and people like me." He was wearing shorts and a green golf shirt. He was probably in his late fifties, but still fit looking.

Mickey stood up and walked by the window. He could talk better standing up. "Mr....."

"My name's Ed."

"Mr. Van Arsdale, I don't know who you are. Why wouldn't I like you?"

"Teachers and intellectual types think rich people like me are phonies." He spoke in a low voice.

Mickey moved to the desk and leaned against it. "I never thought that at all. I thought this was a nice thing for you to do. Have a party and all that. Look it. I'm a suburban brat myself. I'm not nervous around rich folks." He was pleased at how easily he could stand up to this guy.

Mr. Van Arsdale ignored him. "Is that right? Well, I'm not from the suburbs. My dad was a cop. He never went to college. I run a factory in the city. I've got a scar on my back where a Puerto Rican stabbed me. I might be a college grad and a member of a country club, but that's only part of the story – and not the interesting part either."

Mickey shrugged. He figured Van Arsdale wouldn't like a shrug.

"You know, Kid, there's more to the job than you might think."

"I know that." He knew what was coming.

“You really don’t know anything – if you excuse my frankness. Sure, a golf coach is not a golf pro. He wouldn’t dare tell a kid how to swing. But the coach does things. He has choices. Gus made all the right ones. He started his recruiting with 7th graders. When he spotted a good young golfer, he’d make sure the kid came here to Forest and not to St. Regis and not to a prep school. He schmoozed the parents so that would happen. A lot of golfers go away. Or, they might play football or soccer.”

“That makes sense.” Mickey yawned.

“And he worked with the kids. If they played poorly he knew what to say. If they played well, he knew what to say. If they were peaking and slumping, he knew what to say. He could talk to parents. He could talk to the golf pros.

“I can learn to do all of that.”

“He was great at finding scholarships for the kids. He knew the college people. They all wanted Gus’s kids to play for them. Surprised?”

Mickey was determined not to let this guy bully him. He raised his voice and looked the man in the eye. “Give me some credit. I knew it was a big job. You don’t need to talk down to me.”

“People think that just because Gus was a Driver’s Ed teacher that he was a second rate guy, but he wasn’t. You know he was an orphan? He wasn’t from golfing culture.” This guy was obviously used to getting his way. He dealt with union people and contractors and tough guys all the time. These people in the suburbs were nothing. And effete teachers like Mickey were as weak as they come.

“I want you to give the job to someone else. My oldest son has time. He works for me at the factory, but he could take off in the afternoon. He knows what to do. You have no idea what you’re doing. The kids won’t respect you. They think you’re an imposter. Believe me they do. You can’t play golf. You don’t have any connections. You will make the job meaningless. Kids will go out for other sports. They won’t try. Do you get the idea?”

Maybe it was the booze, but Mickey didn’t feel the least bit intimidated by this guy. He looked back and told the guy what he didn’t want to hear. “I’m not going to quit. I was hired. I’ll do my best. They can fire me after next year, but this year I want the job.” Then he headed for the door. “I’m going home now. Thanks for the beer.”

He strode back into the living room. By now the kids were eating a cake shaped like a putting green. Mickey walked over to the bar and poured himself a shot of scotch. He threw it down and then walked over to Mrs. Van Arsdale, who was chatting with two newcomers. "I have to go now Mrs. V. Thanks for the hospitality." He gave her shoulder a hug – the way his parents used to do with their friends. "I hope all you parents keep supporting the team." At the door, he looked back at the kids who were still stuffing their faces. "Monday, guys. See you at the course Monday. We've got work to do."

In the driveway, Van Arsdale caught up with him. He had replaced his sports coat with a sweatshirt. "Mickey, wait for a second. I've changed my mind. You've obviously got more balls than I thought. You should do just fine. I misread you. Let's have one more drink. I'll take you to my favorite bar, I'm getting sick of these suburban types." He slid into the seat next to Mickey and told him to drive towards Skokie.

Jilly's Place was small and dark. Van Arsdale shouted a hello to two construction workers at the bar. They were all watching the Bear's game on the TV. He nodded to a red-haired guy sitting alone in a booth along the side reading a Tom Clancy novel. He gestured for Mickey to sit down at a table in the middle. He went to the bar to order two tequilas. He came back with the drinks along with the lemon and salt.

As they sat drinking, Mickey did most of the talking. He told Van Arsdale that he had gone to college in the West and taught in Seattle. Two years ago, he had moved to the Midwest to go to graduate school at Northwestern. His father was a lawyer, his mom sold real estate. His sister ran a day care center. One day he hoped to write a novel.

Van Arsdale got up and ordered more drinks. When he got back, Mickey started talking about teaching. He said that his current job – working with the problem kids – was not his first choice, but a job is a job and he was pretty good at it. Van Arsdale said that he'd hate to spend his life helping losers. "I'd flatten them the first chance I had." Mickey shrugged and finished the second drink. He had forgotten how much he liked tequila.

Van Arsdale went back to the bar for two more. On the way he stopped by the side booth to joke with the red-haired man.

By the time Mickey finished the third drink, his head was spinning a little and he was starting to slur his words.

It was dark in the parking lot when Mickey climbed into his Ford. He was alone. Van Arsdale had ridden home with someone from Jilly's. "No point for you to drive out of your way, Mickey." The two agreed to talk early next week. Van Arsdale had some material from Gus that Mickey would need.

Maybe Shelly would be up for a movie. He didn't feel like fighting with her. He'd play down his success with Van Arsdale. He'd agree with her that he'd taken the job for the wrong reason, but now he kind of liked it. He was looking for something outside of school. Balance was what he needed. Balance. He would make friends with some of these kids; he didn't always need to be with burnouts and sluts.

He started the car and turned on the radio just in time to hear the Bears lose to the 49ers 17-16. A field goal attempt on the final play had fallen short. He smoked a cigarette and fished around in a bag on the floor for an old Rolling Stone's tape. It was the one with "Beast of Burden," one of his all time favorite songs. He found it and slipped it into the cassette player and listened to Mick Jagger.

He had been driving for only a few blocks when the police car sped up behind him with its lights flashing. He knew enough to stay put. Cops got very edgy if you get out.

Through the rear view mirror he could see the officer in his car talking on the phone. Then he wrote something down and got out of his car and walked towards Mickey. He stopped halfway to copy down Mickey's license number and started walking again. He was dressed in cop blue – blue trousers, blue shirt, dark blue tie, and a blue hat perched on top of his red hair.

