



Fugitive On Tour: On the lam for more than a decade, Robert Atwater blew his cover and ultimately lost his freedom when he couldn't resist the opportunity to live his dream of playing with the pros.(Sports Illustrated Bonus Section: Golf Plus)(Profile)

Robert Atwater has had a difficult relationship with the truth for a long time. It first became apparent at least 15 years ago, when he used to hang out in the VIP lounge at Sensations nightclub in Atlanta, armed with nothing more than a killer smile and a decent suit, trying to convince women that he owned the joint. Since then Atwater (a.k.a. Darren Muarry, Fast Bobby, Darious Conions Harris, Fredrick Jerome Bentley, Leonard Bentley, Curtis James Atwater, Curtis Wayne Atwater and Wayne Atwater) has claimed to be, among other things, the half brother of baseball Hall of Famer Eddie Murray, the owner of a 45-foot yacht, an amateur golfer good enough to have beaten Tiger Woods, an LPGA tour caddie, a country club hustler, a born-again Christian and a budding Champions tour pro. [micro] It should come as no surprise, then, that Robert Atwater is a convicted felon. On Dec. 11, 2002, in the U.S. District Court in Atlanta, Atwater pleaded guilty to conspiring to distribute five kilograms of cocaine for one of the largest drug rings in Georgia history. Last April 18 he was sentenced to 10 years and three months and imprisoned at Taft Correctional Institute, a minimum-security lockup with decent food and first-rate recreational facilities 100 miles northeast of Los Angeles. The truly surprising thing is that what led Atwater to an eight-by-12-foot holding cell deep inside Taft's maze of cool, cream-colored corridors is golf.

"When they called my name on the 1st tee, I was hiding behind the starter's tent taking some deep breaths," says Atwater, his eyes wide and bright as he sits in the visitors' center at Taft. "Man, you should have seen it--there had to be 5,000 people watching me. I hit it good, knocked it slightly left but into the fairway."

Atwater is describing his play in the Champions tour's 2001 SBC Senior Classic at Valencia (Calif.) Country Club. It's an engaging vignette, except the details are almost entirely wrong. The gallery was no bigger than a couple of hundred. As for that well-struck drive? "His practice swings were perfect; the real swing not so good," says an eyewitness. "He topped the ball. It went 50 yards."

Atwater faced a unique kind of pressure. As he stood on that 1st tee, he had been on the run from federal authorities since July 1990. And not only was he playing under an assumed name (Darren Muarry), but he was also just 49, one year below the minimum age for the Champions tour. Whether it was the pressure or his skills, he shot rounds of 85, 82 and 79 to finish dead last, 30 over par and 42 shots behind the winner, Jim Colbert. Atwater won \$756, and to hear him tell it, he didn't play badly after he'd shaken off those 1st-hole nerves. "Actually, I was kind of disappointed I didn't win," he says with apparent sincerity.

Atwater even made SBC Classic tournament director Brian Fitzgerald feel his disappointment. "I felt sorry for the guy," says Fitzgerald. For the next few months Fitzgerald scanned the Monday qualifying results on the Champions tour looking for Muarry's name. "Nothing. But that's the way it is with guys like that," he says. "They get their shot, find out they don't have it and disappear. I assumed that one week at our event was the end for the guy."

Fitzgerald was right. The 2001 SBC Senior Classic was the end for Darren Muarry, but for Robert Atwater it was only the beginning of the end.

Golf runs like a river through Atwater's world. He grew up on a course in Georgia. He caddied through his school years and played whenever he could. Golf, he says, is the only thing that came naturally to him, even though his swing--an ugly, cross-handed swipe that starts with him aiming 70 yards to the right of his target and ends, more often than not, with the ball somewhere near its intended destination--looks as natural as the Atlanta skyline. Yet he could play well enough to make a living of sorts; on mini-tours, at pro-ams and at country clubs and munis from Florida to California. "I'd go anywhere there was gambling," Atwater says. "Everybody plays for something, even if it's only a meal. I love golf and the challenge it offers--though it ain't a challenge to me because I play well--and the people you meet through the game. Good people." Bad people too.

Atwater met Atlanta-based businessman Vernon Copeland in Miami in the early 1980s when Atwater drove the green on a short par-4 while Copeland was still putting out. At first Copeland was angry, but then the two got to talking. "I told him I was trying to make a living playing golf," Atwater says, "and he said I should come and stay with him whenever I was in Atlanta. He said he'd help get me some money."

To the casual observer Copeland was a businessman with a couple of nightclubs. But he was also a major player in a drug ring. In 1992 he was convicted of distributing cocaine in the Atlanta area and laundering the profits through his clubs and real estate investments. He was sentenced to 30 years in prison. Atwater says he knew little about his friend's activities, at least initially. It wasn't his concern, and anyway he was happy to have Copeland's roof over his head. Plus, there were perks that came with being a friend of Copeland's: free courtside tickets to Hawks games; rubbing elbows with Copeland's NFL buddies; VIP treatment at Copeland's nightclubs, where Atwater also got the chance to work his charms on the female clientele.

Why was Copeland so hospitable? Either he was very generous or Atwater is being modest about his contribution to his friend's illicit business. Special agent Frank Mazzilli of the Drug Enforcement Agency in Atlanta says it was the latter. "According to eyewitness testimony," says Mazzilli, "[Atwater] used to pick up cocaine for the ring. He was involved in counting the drug money and in the distribution of cocaine. He accompanied Copeland on drug deals and helped deliver large quantities of drug money that was used to finance the nightclubs. This guy played a significant role in this criminal organization."

Whatever his relationship with Copeland, by July 1990 Atwater was back in Florida eking out a living from golf, he says, when the DEA ended its 18-month investigation of the drug ring with a raid on Copeland's home. Among the items discovered there were four handguns, 12 kilos of cocaine and a pile of clothes belonging to Atwater. Eight people were indicted, including Copeland, his partner, Fredel Williamson, and a big-time Atlanta lawyer named Michael D. Griggs, who was involved in the pair's money-laundering operation. An indictment containing 24 counts was issued, including one naming Atwater as a coconspirator. Williamson and Griggs were also convicted and given jail terms. "I didn't know about Vern getting arrested until eight, nine months later, when I went back to Atlanta," Atwater says. "I didn't know there was a warrant out for my arrest. I asked my

lawyer if the police were looking for me, and she said, 'They ain't called.' I figured if they ain't brought no warrant, they ain't looking for me."

But according to the U.S. Marshals Service, which tracks down fugitives, it was about this time that Atwater began serially changing his name--to Muarry, Bentley, Harris, etc.--and he established an address in Los Angeles. According to Atwater, he carried on much as before, jumping from state to state (Florida, Oklahoma, and Texas) hustling golf, picking up loops wherever he could. He claims to have spent time caddying on the LPGA tour for, among others, Jane Blalock and Kathy Whitworth. (Shown a photograph of the erstwhile bag carrier, both players said, "I've never seen him before.")

Whatever he was doing, Atwater was able to avoid capture. According to Deputy U.S. Marshal Arnold Perkins, "His case simply went cold for a while." It started thawing in the spring of 1999, when Atwater, going by the name Darren Muarry, showed up at the caddie shack of L.A.'s Wilshire Country Club. "We had a Senior tour event, and he was hanging around because he didn't have a bag," says Pete Dwyer, Wilshire's caddiemaster. "I told him, 'Why don't you caddie here?'"

Muarry soon made a reputation for himself at the club. Two reputations, actually. In the caddie shack he was known as a b.s. artist who talked a lot about his luxury yacht, his brother, Eddie, the baseball legend (the difference in spelling didn't come to light until later) and how he was going to make his fortune playing professional golf. Among the members Muarry was known as a good man to have on the bag. "He had only been here a few weeks when people started asking for him," Dwyer says. "He knew what he was doing out there, so he could help people with their games."

One of the Wilshire members who started asking for Muarry was Todd Ellsworth. "Did I like the guy?" Ellsworth says. "No. I adored him. Basically, he sort of adopted me, and I sort of adopted him."

Talk about an odd couple--the black caddie and the white investment banker. The fugitive drug courier and the former student president of Pepperdine Law School. The ladies man and the family man. Yet "something clicked between us," Ellsworth says. "I brought him to meet my dad and my son. They loved him straight away, like I did. He was kind, gentle and had a strong belief in God."

It didn't take long for Darren to graduate from Todd's caddie to Todd's golfing buddy. "I'd only known him for a few days when he told me he was in training for the Senior tour," Ellsworth says. "I wanted to see if he had what it takes." Ellsworth let Muarry hit a few shots one afternoon, and the result was a couple of beautifully struck irons. A few days later the pair played Wilshire's back nine. Muarry was four under. Ellsworth booked a time at L.A. Country Club, a tougher track. Muarry shot one under. "That's when I decided I'd help him," Ellsworth says.

It started with advice, then advanced to writing letters on Muarry's behalf. Equipment was next. Muarry was using an old \$80 set with a sweet spot the size of a sunflower seed and duct tape for grips. Ellsworth gave him a new set of Mizuno irons and bought Muarry some golf clothes. Then he and his father and a few pals fronted Muarry \$10,000 to kick-start his new life.

The plan was for Muarry to go to Florida for some warmup tournaments, work with a swing coach and then start playing in Monday qualifiers for the Senior tour. But when his big chance came along, Muarry didn't need to qualify to secure a spot in the field alongside Colbert, Ray Floyd, Lanny Wadkins and the rest of the gang. He didn't need Ellsworth's 10 grand or the new clothes. All it took was his inherent charm, and dishonesty, to get into the tournament.

Muarry had hoped to pick up a pro's bag at the 2000 SBC Classic, but he had to settle for a loop in the pro-am, caddying for SBC executive Laura Watts. Like Ellsworth, Watts was impressed by the way Muarry conducted himself on the course and by his apparent determination to make it on the senior circuit--so impressed that she introduced him to her husband, Jim, a retired SBC executive. "He took me out to Riviera or some place like that," Atwater says. "I shot four under, maybe five under, I can't remember. It was supposed to be a tough course, but it didn't bother me."

The Wattses and Ellsworth got together and hatched a plan. "Laura came to me and asked if Darren could be given consideration for a sponsor's invite [for the '01 SBC]," says tournament director Fitzgerald. "Ultimately it was my call, but I certainly take the sponsor's wishes into account when I decide who gets to play. The thing about Darren was, he ticked a lot of boxes. He was a minority, and SBC is sensitive to minority issues. Plus he could play a bit, and he had that cross-handed thing going. He was a story--a feel-good caddie-turned-pro story--that I thought might generate media interest."

Sure enough, the Los Angeles Times, Golf World magazine and Fox Sports bit on the caddie-turned-pro story. (Golf World's headline: former Augusta national caddie can't master Valencia.) Ray Floyd took a sideways look at Muarry's unorthodox swing and said, "I guess there's more than one way to skin a cat." To Tony Chieffo and the other assistant pros at Valencia, Muarry was "a cult hero," Chieffo says. "It started with the cross-handed thing. You see guys putting cross-handed all the time but not hitting the ball cross-handed." Chieffo was among the 100 or so people, who watched Muarry, in a group with Chuck Moran and Jessie Patino, tee off in the first round. So was Ellsworth, as nervous as a father on his son's first day of school.

Finishing 42 shots behind the winner will crush even the most grandiose of golfing dreams. Within a couple of weeks Atwater had stopped caddying at Wilshire and stopped returning Ellsworth's calls. Ellsworth persisted until the day he punched in Muarry's cellphone number and the message came up: disconnected. "I wasn't bothered about the money," Ellsworth says. "Walking away without saying anything wasn't the kind of thing you do to your friends. It didn't seem like something Darren would do. I was worried about him."

After a couple of months worry turned into hurt, then suspicion. Ellsworth wrote down everything Muarry had told him about himself, and it was obvious something wasn't right. "Part of me said, I've been ripped off," says Ellsworth. "But the other part said, I want to find this guy, look him in the eye and ask, 'Were you telling me lies all along?'"

On the other side of the country, someone else was putting together another inventory of Darren Muarry's life, though under the heading Robert Atwater. A new deputy U.S. marshal, Leza Myracle, had been assigned his case in the fall of 2001. She came to the case with fresh enthusiasm, new insights and investigative techniques, and a breakthrough--she had linked the name Darren Muarry with Robert Atwater, though she won't say how, for fear of affecting the search for other fugitives.

"During the course of her investigations, Deputy Myracle established that Atwater was an avid golfer," says Perkins, who was Myracle's supervisor. "When she put Muarry's name into the Yahoo search engine and his scores from the SBC Classic came up, she was fairly certain it was him." Marshals in L.A. started circulating Atwater's picture at city courses. Within days someone provided an address. A house in Inglewood was put under surveillance. On April 30, 2002, a dozen armed marshals arrested Atwater in an early-morning raid on the house. After 11 years, 10 months, a handful of aliases and an abortive career as a Champions tour pro, Atwater's odyssey was finally over.

Now, locked up in Taft, where the earliest he can be released is April 2011, Atwater has had all the time in the world to answer the most vexing of questions: Why would a fugitive play in a pro golf tournament? "I couldn't stop myself," he says. "I love golf. This was my chance, and if it happened again, I'd do the same thing."

What about the people who helped him: Laura Watts, who has been the subject of endless teasing at the office, and Todd Ellsworth, who gave him emotional and financial support and received lies and deception in return? "They're good people, nice people," Atwater says. "I've been trying to get in touch with Todd. I didn't set out to hurt him. I'm not an evil person."

There's nothing in the Champions tour's rule book that says convicted felons aren't welcome. So now Atwater dreams of Q school, circa 2011. Until then he will stay in shape with sit-ups and push-ups and endless jogs around the barbed-wire-enclosed track at Taft. To keep his golf muscles sharp, he hits a Ping-Pong ball around the prison yard with a broom handle. He recently heard about a prison in Las Vegas where the inmates get to work at a driving range, and he's thinking about applying for a transfer. "You write this down," he says, "you let the world know--I am going to play on the Champions tour."

What a story that would make, you tell him. He shakes his head. Never mind a story, what about a movie? A cross between Catch Me If You Can and The Legend of Bagger Vance.

Atwater knows just the guy to play him on screen. "Will Smith," he says excitedly. "Now there's a good-looking guy."

Will Smith is good, you say, but Denzel Washington would be better.

Suddenly, Atwater is on his feet, he's so excited. He thinks he can make this one fly. "Denzel Washington?" he says. "Denzel's a friend of mine. I met him at a tournament once."

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