



Robert Atwater, who played golf as Darren Muarry, is behind bars in Atlanta.

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Fugitive Marks Time On Senior Tour

Darren Muarry was the talk of the Senior PGA event near Los Angeles 18 months ago. The former caddie from Georgia with the unorthodox grip teed it up in the SBC Senior Classic with Larry Nelson, Tom Kite and Hale Irwin. With a lineless face, slim waist and Popeye arms, he didn't look old enough to be 50, but he persuaded tournament officials he was. They weren't the only ones fooled. On Tuesday, the man California golfers knew as Darren Muarry pleaded guilty to a federal drug charge in Atlanta after a dozen years on the lam. His real name is Robert Atwater, but he was also known as "Fast Bobby." Instead of a retirement on the links, he faces a minimum 10 years in federal prison, maximum of life without parole.

At the hearing, U.S. District Judge J. Owen Forrester appeared surprised that Atwater was in court after so long. "This is an old case. Where's he been?" "Mr. Atwater's been playing a little golf on the Senior PGA Tour," replied Asst. U.S. Attorney William Thomas with a chuckle. He later provided the judge with news clippings of Atwater's weekend in the pro golf spotlight. Defense attorney Richard Allen said afterward he couldn't offer more details other than his client "said he beat Tiger Woods." The myth of Darren Muarry played well at the SBC Senior Classic in March, 2001. He had caddied in that tournament the year before, and now he was playing in it. The Los Angeles Times reported that the tournament sponsor gave him a spot in the field after he had caddied for one of its executives and favorably impressed her. The paper reported he benchpressed 400 pounds, ran 10-12 miles a day and hit 700 balls "on a slow day." He also turned heads for his unorthodox means of ripping a 300 yard drives. "I aim 50 yards right, but the ball ends up straight," Atwater told the paper. Ray Floyd watched him hit balls with a crosshanded grip and remarked, "I guess there's more than one way to skin a cat." One of the assistant pros at host Valencia Country Club remembered Atwater talking big that week. "He said he had a yacht in Ventura and we should come fishing in his boat, that kind of thing," Tony Chieffo recalled Wednesday. "It was very embellishing." An investment banker who had seen him play was sponsoring him for a few months while he tried to make it as a Tour pro. These were big breaks from his regular work toting bags at Wilshire Country Club, in the heart of Hollywood, where actors like Don Knotts and Leslie Nielsen sometimes play. Other caddies knew him as the brother of former pro baseball player Eddie Murray. He drove a red 1973 Mercedes. "He was a really nice guy," said Peter Dwyer, the caddiemaster who hired Atwater, said. "We were pulling for him. People really liked him. He could have stayed here, but he was working on getting sponsors behind him. One thing that hindered him, though, was he actually didn't play real well." "He was more a kind of cult figure," said

Chieffo. "A lot of people putt cross-handed, but you don't see people play that way." Until U.S. Marshals started calling pro shops earlier this year, Atwater's California friends had no idea that Atwater was a fugitive. One of his former teachers didn't want to talk to reporters for fear of reprisal. Atwater was initially indicted on July 31, 1990, with five other defendants on money laundering and drug charges. He faced one count of conspiring to sell more than 500 grams of cocaine between March 1988 and October 1988. The rest of the co-defendants went to trial in 1992. "I took a guy somewhere who had money and drugs on him," he told the judge. "I didn't know it the first time, but I did know it the second time."

He also told the judge he was 50. Court records show his birthdate of Jan. 2, 1952 making him 49 at the time of his Senior PGA appearance --- a year too young for the field. The records also show that U.S. Marshals arrested him in Inglewood, Calif., on April 30. On court forms, he said he was earning \$600 a week as a golf pro and was estranged from his wife.

In a previous court motion, filed by a different attorney, Atwater sought to have the 1990 charge against him dismissed. "Mr. Atwater, using the name of Darren Muarry, has played pro golf and otherwise lived openly under the name of Darren Muarry for several years," the motion said. "He has not been arrested because of the government's failure to look for him." His attorney changed and so did his defense. He agreed to cooperate with prosecutors in exchange for their pledge to ask the judge for leniency, based on Atwater's "substantial assistance" to the prosecution, acceptance of responsibility, his role as a minor participant and his lack of prior criminal history. After the hearing Wednesday, U.S. Marshals escorted Atwater back to the Atlanta penitentiary, where he is under "lockdown," with no phone or visiting privileges, his attorney said. He will be sentenced Feb. 21. Meanwhile, a 15-foot scoreboard remains just inside the entrance of the fancy Valencia Country Club, proof of Atwater's golfing pinnacle. It lists his three rounds on the Senior PGA: 85-82-79, 42 shots behind winner Jim Colbert. His lifetime senior PGA earnings: \$756. In his only PGA tournament, he finished last.

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