

The Perfectiona and Parfection of Notre Dame's Tyrone Willingham

By John Wukovitz

The campus of the University of Notre Dame glistens in the mid-morning sun as I drive up for the interview with head football coach, Tyrone Willingham, who has agreed to discuss his love for golf. Towering trees throw their shade on the multi-colored flowers that line the paths, and small groups of visitors meander about the campus's landmarks.

Not surprisingly, football dominates many of the landmarks' themes. Coach Willingham's office rests directly across from the stadium, where Knute Rockne, the Four Horsemen, Paul Hornung, Ara Parseghian, and Joe Montana worked their miracles. Statues honor athletic director Ed "Moose" Krause and football coach Frank Leahy. Even the university's 14-story library, built to further advanced thought and research, is more commonly associated with a stone mural that students have labeled "Touchdown Jesus" for the way its main figure raises his hands as if indicating six points.

Fortunately, I thought, our interview will be conducted in a more pastoral locale—the school's 7,011-yard Warren Golf Course. Surely there, on a gorgeous, demanding layout designed by Ben Crenshaw, away from the football and the memories, Willingham could escape the pressures associ-



Notre Dame's Tyrone Willingham

ated with being Notre Dame's head coach, relax, and have some fun. Instead of the football coach or analyst, I would chat with Tyrone Willingham, the regular person, as if the two were separate entities.

Not so. You learn immediately that Willingham views every endeavor in the same fashion—as an opportunity to learn and to instruct. The golf course, like the football field, is yet another classroom where education and challenges take place. As Notre Dame assistant football coach and close friend, Bob Simmons, states, "Golf is a reflection of him. He's there to be the

best that he can be."

Willingham first took up the sport in 1978 when he worked as a graduate assistant for the Michigan State football staff. At the urging of fellow coach, Sherman Lewis, who recognized the value of golf in building relationships and recruiting for the football program, especially with alumni golf outings, Willingham played his first round. He began with a 14 on a par-4 hole, which only whetted his appetite to conquer the demanding game.

When his busy schedule permits, Willingham plays three times a during May-July. He claims his current eight handicap is low for his talents, but states that he usually shoots between 78 and 84 on the difficult par-71 Crenshaw layout.

Not surprisingly for an introspective football coach, Willingham loves the mental aspect of golf. "He thinks about every shot," says Simmons. "His course management is one of his strengths." Simmons adds that Willingham's length off the tees supplements a sound putting and chipping game.

Two aspects of the course particularly appeal to the coach in Willingham—Notre Dame's 10th hole, a par-5 tester that, at 495 yards, temptingly offers the chance to either go for the green in two or lay up in a safe area, and the multiple-layered greens which impartially reward accuracy and punish errant shots. It is just as he would



The 16th hole at Notre Dame s Warren Golf Course.

have it in football—develop a strategy, then rely on execution for success or failure.

Willingham’s philosophy does not vary whether it relates to golf or football—he approaches each shot or each play as if it is the only important matter, but once it is done, he moves on. “In golf, I want every shot to be the best it can be, but as soon as that shot is over, it’s over. It is similar to what I teach my players. It is this play that is important.”

As another foursome walks down the 16th fairway, Willingham explains that while he plays golf for both enjoyment and competition, it is

the competition that brings him the fun. He does not understand those who can play the sport and not care about their score, for that is his method of challenging himself to do better. “Some guys say they’ll take any score in golf,” says Coach Simmons. “That’s not Coach Willingham! He wants to be the best. If he can improve, he wants to.”

Willingham notices many similarities between golf and football. “If you want to be good, you need attention to detail. In golf, if you just go up there and hit the ball, you may have chosen the wrong club or misjudged the wind. In football, players have to be aligned properly. If a split is too great, then a player

cannot properly execute the play.”

“The basic fundamentals in golf are alignment, alignment, and alignment,” he adds with a laugh. “It starts with hands, then it goes to feet, lower body, upper body. If one can get perfectly aligned and bring the club face back on line, they will have success.”

Golf, like football, thus provides the same thrill that Willingham seeks in any endeavor—to be the best he can be at that moment. “It’s fun to compete. Not that you have to win all the time, but the real fun is competition.” One quick conversation with the likable coach shows that he lives that philosophy every moment of his life. *MG*