

Catching Up with Tom Gillis

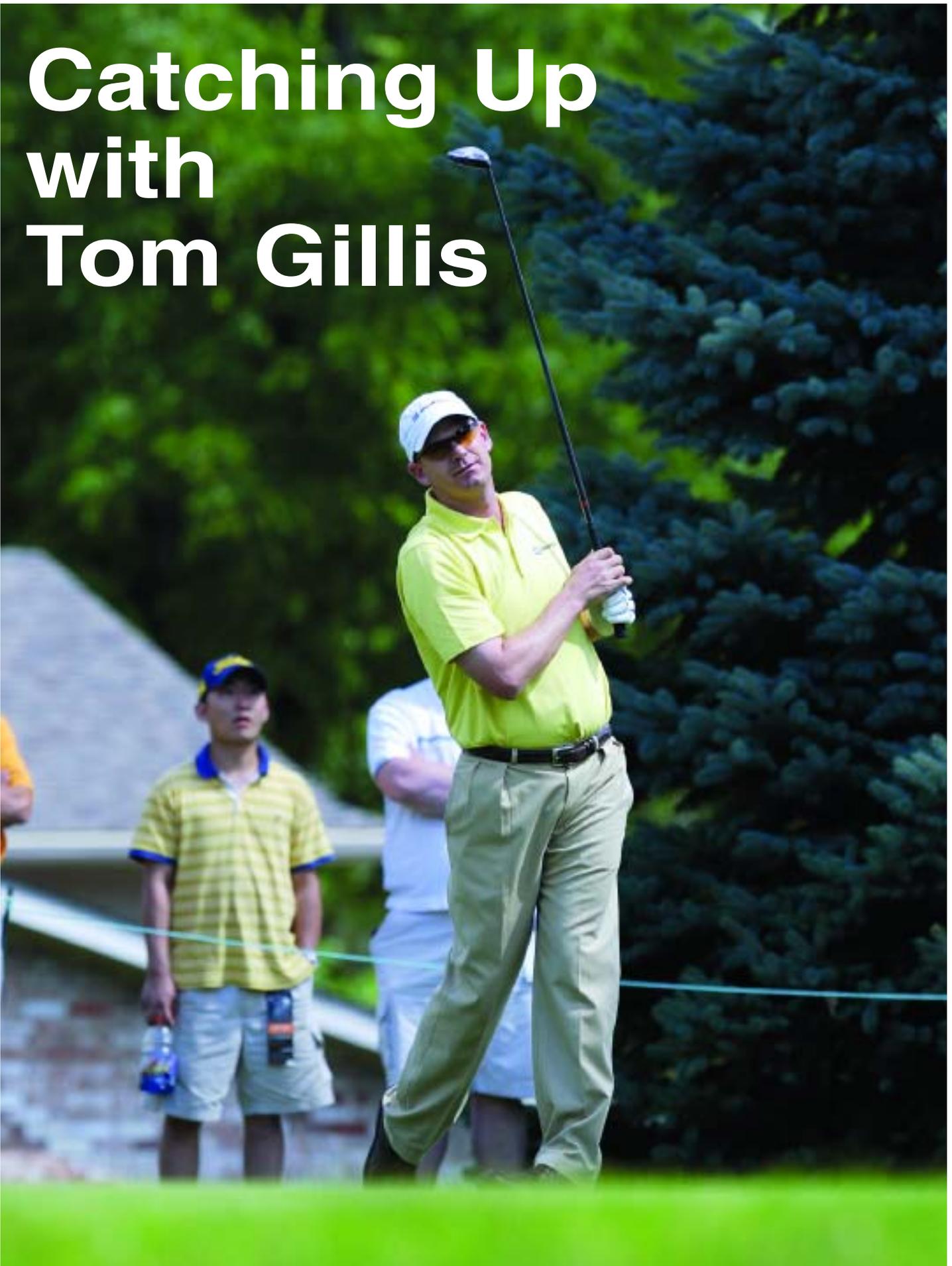


Photo by Carter Sherline / Frog Prince Studios

By Dave Ruthenberg

Pontiac native Tom Gillis knew from the time that he was 14 years old that he wanted to be a professional golfer but it is likely he never envisioned having to contend with monkeys on a green during a tournament.

Gillis, a 38-year old native of Pontiac who now resides in Lake Orion, is currently playing on the Gateway Tour, “sort of like a Class A minor league of golf to use baseball terminology,” Gillis explained. But it’s been a long, winding road that has landed Gillis on golf’s minor league circuit. “I have been in a slump for about 2 years. It’s mostly between the ears. The Gateway Tour is the best place for me to be right now to regain my confidence.” Gillis hopes to climb his way back to the PGA Tour at some point.

Most people only see the glamorous side of professional golf and can’t appreciate the sacrifices and the emotional ups and downs of the life of a touring golf pro. Gillis is living proof of the level of commitment and perseverance required and even then there is no guarantee of success.

“Playing in the Gateway Tour is a lot like organized gambling,” said Gillis who is making his temporary home in Florida where the tour is based. “You pay a \$1,000 entry fee and essentially the money is pooled. It’s a place where young players try to work their way up to or where guys like me come to get their game back.” Last year the Gateway Tour paid out a total of \$7.2 million over 59 tournaments. The tour also has a West Coast

home in Arizona. Gillis plans to play through the spring in Florida and hopes to make a return engagement to the Buick Open in Grand Blanc.

“I intend to go through the Open qualifying; at least that’s my plan.” Gillis competed in the Buick Open in 2006 but failed to make the cut after two rounds. “It was great to play there. It’s a great course and it was only 35 minutes from home but there were a lot of distractions. People I hadn’t seen in twenty years were asking for tickets. But don’t get me wrong, it was all worthwhile.”

Gillis first became enamored with the game that would turn into his lifelong passion by playing golf with his parents at Oxford Hills in Oakland County and then working at Indianwood Country Club for ten years where his talent was recognized early on. “I was really fortunate as people saw that I could play and really took me under their wing there (at Indianwood). I was treated like a member and could play whenever I wanted.”

He was able to parlay his talents into a spot on the Coastal Carolina collegiate golf team. “Playing in Myrtle Beach, you couldn’t have asked for anything much better,” reminisced Gillis. “Back then though the program was not in good shape but it has really improved and is considered a top ten program now.”

After completing his stint at Coastal Carolina, Gillis returned home and was runner-up in the

1990 Michigan Amateur Open and then a short two years later won the Iowa Waterloo Open, netting a first place purse of \$10,000 but his biggest win would come in the fall of 1993 when Gillis bested Jim Thorpe to claim the \$27,000 first place purse in the Jamaica Open. Gillis also claimed the 1994 Michigan Open title.

After playing in the “mini tours” as Gillis calls them, around the US from 1990-1997, he qualified for a regular spot on the European Tour starting in 1997 and the real adventures started.

The European Tour is really a misnomer as the tour itself extends far beyond Europe, making stops in Asia and Africa as well, leading to some unique experiences for Gillis, who was the only American regular on the European Tour during his last two years on the circuit.

“There were times that I wasn’t sure that the plane was going to make it in safely, some of those places were so remote,” said Gillis. “I remember being on a plane from Swaziland to Johannesburg and just keeping my fingers crossed.” Then there was the time, also in South Africa, that Gillis got to experience a taste of the wild where it seemed monkeys share the course with the players. “You don’t play many places where you actually have a pack of monkeys on the green or following you along the fairways,” Gillis chuckled. “That was strange.”

Gillis has also literally played with his head in the clouds.

“Playing at Deer Island off the

Photo left: Tom Gillis picked up 11 K for his 2007 Buick finish.

cost of Portugal we actually had a delay due to rolling clouds. Not rain or storm clouds, just regular clouds. The first tee was so high up and in a valley that you were actually higher than the clouds. When the clouds rolled through play had to be stopped because those on like the second or third tee could not see. You were literally standing in middle of the clouds.”

Gillis had become a fixture on the European Tour, making a nice living but at home things were falling apart and the long time spent apart eventually cost him his marriage.

He has since remarried and his current wife, Jennifer, has a better understanding of the game and the travel. She and Gillis met while she was an assistant coach for the golf team at Oakland University. “It really helps to have somebody who understands the game and knows the mental toll it can take on you.”

After spending several seasons in Europe, Gillis finally earned a spot on the PGA Tour in 2003 and had one of his best personal years, earning \$600,000 on tour through both winnings and endorsements, and played in the US Open and British Open in 2003. “Earning my card was an incredible feeling of elation,” recalled Gillis.

Gillis last appeared on the PGA



Photo by Dave Ruthenberg

Tom Gillis

Tour as a regular in 2005 before losing his card which brings us back to his current status on the Gateway Tour. A spot far away from the limelight, where there are no galleries and the players ride in a cart and no caddies are permitted.

The next step for Gillis could potentially be on the Nationwide Tour, which serves as the feeder for the PGA and has really seen an upturn in talent and money payouts over the past 2-3 years.

“I really believe that the talent is deeper now on the Nationwide Tour than in Europe and the money is approaching significant amounts too. I think you will soon see a \$1 million purse on the Nationwide

Tour,” added Gillis. “65% of the players now on the PGA came through the Nationwide Tour and nine out of ten players in the Ryder Cup came from there as well, so the talent is really deep.”

Gillis also notes that today’s younger players are more hell bent on distance than anything else. “Today’s young players really do have a ‘grip it and rip it’ mentality,” says Gillis. The courses being built today are all being built for distance and less for finesse.” Shot making skill has taken a back seat to distance now. The equipment has changed so much too, placing a premium on distance over anything else.” It also means that physical fitness has become more important

than ever as well.

“I spend more time now in the gym than I would have ever imagined. Years ago you didn’t have to worry about being a little out of shape, but now you have to keep up with the young guys who are hitting the big shots.”

Gillis has no regrets in a career that has spanned several continents and earned him over \$1.2 million over the course of his career and plans to turn his current status in the Gateway Tour into a ticket back to the big time.

“I just have to attack it as a professional. I believe I will get back there again.” **MG**