

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Thirsty Golf Fans

*“Eighty Percent of Success is
Just Showing Up.”*

— Attributed to Woody Allen

THE 37TH RYDER CUP

LIKE CONCERTS AND MUSIC festivals, some of Rocket Man’s most memorable sporting events didn’t take place inside major stadiums or racetracks. I’m thinking of one sport in particular. We hawked beer at some outstanding golf tournaments over the years—both prestigious and notorious. The most esteemed was the 37th Ryder Cup in 2008, held just a few miles from our home office at the Valhalla Golf Club in eastern Louisville.

Going into the biennial event, Team USA had lost three consecutive tournaments to Team Europe. With only three players ranked among the PGA’s top 10, the American squad seemed unlikely to break their losing streak. Yet even though the odds were not in their favor, Team USA pulled out an unexpected victory, thanks, in part, to outstanding performances

by two Kentucky natives—Kenny Perry and J. B. Holmes. The pair's Bluegrass connections made them instant favorites of the Kentucky natives interspersed among the mostly American—yet distinctly international—crowd.

The American fans had been subdued going into the event, but when Team USA came back from a slow start on Friday morning to grab a 3–1 lead at the break (which they never gave up) the tone shifted dramatically. As the partisan crowd's spirits lifted, demand for beer rose in unison and Rocket Man was there to help quench the thirst of the joyous gallery. Team Europe would spend the next day and a half trying to chip away at that advantage, but by the time Sunday rolled around, the home team still enjoyed the same two-point cushion. It was an awesome weekend for every American involved, especially those of us from Kentucky.

For me, it wasn't just the US victory, Kentucky players, or the pallets of beer we sold that made the Ryder Cup so rewarding, but also that I got to share it with some of our best friends—Mike and Debbie from Texas, and Hal and Kristy from Missouri. Each of them also joined Debbie and me for three PGA Championships at Valhalla. Great times, every time.

PHOENIX OPEN

The vivacious crowd chants and cheers at the energetic Ryder Cup made the event feel more like a football game than a traditional golf tournament but nothing can compare to the rowdiness at the Phoenix Open. Officially titled the Waste Management Phoenix Open, the fans are known for getting a little

trashy (pun intended). The annual competition held at TPC Scottsdale is the best-attended event on the PGA Tour, drawing more than 500,000 spectators during the week and more than 200,000 on Saturdays alone. Known as “The Greatest Show on Grass,” the event has purposefully cultivated a party-like atmosphere. The raucous spectators are straight up rowdy, and that boisterous energy is fueled, in large part, by lots of beer—which we were always happy to serve!

We began our 10-year association with the rambunctious golf tournament in 2013, when we partnered with Prom Management, an Arizona-based catering company that managed the event’s foodservice concessions. Rocket Man flew in just one manager and two workers for our first Phoenix Open, who, along with a handful of walking vendors, only served fans around the infamous 16th hole.



The 16th hole of the WM Phoenix Open, known as “The loudest hole in golf.”

Known as the loudest hole in golf, the 16th is a par three enclosed by a temporary grandstand where fans (many in costume) break every rule of golf etiquette. They boo poor shots, cheer loudly for good ones, and generally cause a ruckus. If a player hits a hole-in-one, the gallery erupts and throws beers and other objects in celebration.

On the Saturday of the Phoenix Open in 2022, Sam Ryder (what a great name for a golfer) aced the hole late in the after-

noon, and the fans threw their full cups of beer onto the course. A friend said to me, “That must have been great for Rocket Man’s beer sales.” Unfortunately, it wasn’t. The remarkable shot was made after alcohol sales had ended for the day, so the partiers were throwing away their last beer.



Thirsty golf fans in costume posing with one of our walking vendors at the WM Phoenix Open.

TEN-YEAR GROWTH SPURT

We gradually increased our footprint throughout our decade-long tenure and watched revenues grow from \$145,000 in 2013 to \$1.3 million in 2022. Not bad for a single weekend each year. The progress came with a lot of very hard work for our management team and support staff, some of whom would stay at the golf course past midnight to restock our commissaries with pallets of beer and ice. Despite all the effort, they liked going to the event because the atmosphere was so much fun, and the weather was usually spectacular—Arizona in February is a very good place to be. I only showed up twice, but my guests and I had a blast both times.

NO-HOLDS-BARRED

I’m relieved Rocket Man ended our participation prior to the 2024 Phoenix Open, which was marred by drunken behavior so unruly that alcohol sales were suspended during Saturday’s



Customers at the WM Phoenix Open stacked empty beer cups into long, snake-like structures—a visible display of consumption.

rounds. The tipping point occurred when a shirtless buffoon, spurred on by a roaring crowd, front-flipped from the stands into a bunker, landed flat on his back, and created a body-shaped crater in the sand like a real-life version of *Looney Tunes*' Wile E. Coyote. I'm glad they couldn't blame us for that

one, though we did see trouble coming.

Before the Phoenix Open totally lost control, we were already very nervous about overcrowding and excessive drinking at the no-holds-barred event. It was becoming more and more difficult for Rocket Man to renew our annual general and liquor liability insurance policies at affordable rates and dodge the ongoing threat of alcohol-related lawsuits (more on that later). We did our part to reduce our legal exposure in Phoenix by limiting the number of walking vendors and strictly enforcing ID checks and the 2-drink limit, but that did little to curb the madness.

THE PLAYERS CHAMPIONSHIP

Like the Phoenix open, The Players Championship (considered by many to be the unofficial fifth major) in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, was also far more rambunctious than a typi-

cal golf tournament. The prestigious event was held at TPC Sawgrass, a luxurious course famous for its iconic 17th hole, a par-three known as “Island Green.” The tournament’s concessionaire became acquainted with Rocket Man at Jaguars home games. (Ponte Vedra Beach is part of a Jacksonville metropolitan area known as “First Coast.”) They figured our walking vendors would be an ideal way to serve beer to the crowds that swelled at certain holes when popular golfers played through. We agreed to terms and began our association with the tournament in 2007.

The organizers of the Players’ Championship decided to promote alcohol sales to attract a younger audience. As a result, many spectators were only there to drink beer and have a good time and either didn’t understand or care about the game or its traditions, like remaining silent when a golfer is swinging. This was often frustrating for the Tour pros who were competing for the coveted trophy and very big prize money. I’m sure the golf purists among the fans were frustrated, too, but most of those who attended had an absolute blast, and our walking vendors did very well.

SUPER BOWLS AND KENTUCKY DERBIES

The most memorable Rocket Man events weren’t golf tournaments, fireworks, music festivals, or concerts. Nothing compares to the six Super Bowls or the twenty-five consecutive Kentucky Derbies we had the privilege of being involved with. The stories and interesting anecdotes from each of these two legendary sporting events deserve and receive chapters of their

own. Before I get to those, however, let me tell you about some of Rocket Man's boldest refusals to sell beverages in a venue or at an event, including the Olympic Games!