

Augusta 2017

Well ladies and gentlemen, here you go. This is my Augusta National story.

Jim Mclean, my mentor when it comes to teaching golf, said to me many moons ago “one of the beauties of teaching golf, is that you will meet people from all walks of life and many of them will become your friend.” I think about that often. I thought about it with a smile on my face when I drove up Magnolia lane for the first time last Monday.

True to his word, I have taught people from all walks of life and many of them have become my friends – Condoleezza Rice – is one of them. I cannot thank her enough for hosting me at Augusta these last couple of days. The experience and the memories I will take away from staying and playing there will last with me forever. The Masters in 2018 will definitely take on a new light now that I know the nuances of the course just a wee bit better.

It all started back in May when Condi said to me “ Kathryn, what are you doing December 18&19?” To which I replied, “ hopefully playing golf with you somewhere very special!” She laughed and confirmed that Augusta was happening if I could make it – ya think!!

By design, I like to take time in December to visit with my family back in Scotland, so when I was booking my flight there this winter, I made it via Augusta. It’s kind of, sort of on the way ☺

Just as every great player from Hogan to Nicklaus to Woods to Speith can attest to, driving up Magnolia gives you goose bumps. The first thing to strike me was the stark contrast between inside and outside of the discreet gate that guards the hallowed grounds of ANGC. Inside it’s opulent, magical and beautiful. Outside it’s not.

Everything is immaculate. Even deep into December the grounds looked like a well kept English garden. I can’t even imagine what it must be like in April when the azaleas are in full bloom and the world watches the best golfers duke it out to don the green jacket. Talking of green jackets, it was one of these surreal moments to have dinner in the clubhouse last night when all the members proudly wore their green. All members must wear their green jacket when eating dinner. Before you ask what Condi’s jacket looks like, it looks stylish, feminine and really cool!

I was one of a group of eight people playing on this trip. Before teeing off on Monday we dropped off our luggage in the Eisenhower Cottage, the one adjacent to the Butler Cabin, right behind the putting green and close to the tenth tee. Not too shabby to say the least. When he was running the country, President Eisenhower spent a lot of time at Augusta and the story goes that the Eisenhower Cottage was more secure than the White House!

Then it was off to meet our caddies for a quick warm up before we ventured on the course around 11:30 am. Ralph was my man. He was 77 years young and obviously loved his job. Condi offered one piece of advice when it came to the caddies, she said trust them on the greens. I put that to the test on the very first hole. After a nervy drive (left, of course when the hands get too active) I left my approach just short then nudged a pitch up to about 15 feet to a back pin position. I consider myself to be a fairly good green reader and saw the putt move left to right. Ralph did his 'aim point' routine with his feet and after shuffling around plus doing the finger thing, he came back to me and said a foot and half right to left. Mmm, what do I do because I am thinking there is no way that putt moves right to left. Then I heard Condi's voice in my head saying "trust your caddy." So, I aimed to where he said, put a beautiful stroke on it and in it went! Ok, Ralph was in! I was going to trust him all day and not try and figure these greens out by myself. Trust me folks they are brutal!

The highlights from the first round were birdies at 8, 13 and 16. The par five eighth was routine, good drive, good lay up, good wedge followed by a solid putt from 12 feet. There was another incident where I saw the putt completely opposite from what Ralph said, but I trusted him and in it went – again. The birdie at 13 was not so pretty, in fact it was ugly. An average drive, followed by a chunked lay up followed by a thinned approach was polished off by a great pitch in from the bank of Rae's Creek! See it doesn't matter how your birdies come as long as you have belief you have a good shot in you – lol!

The one at 16 was pretty special though. I have been lucky enough to have racked up 11 holes in one through out my career and it had crossed my mind before we played, how special it would be if my 12th one could be recorded at Augusta. The 16th pin position on Monday was the front (ish) left position which is favorable for an ace because anything pushed right will funnel back down to the hole. TV does not do any of the slopes at Augusta justice and the slope on 16 is particularly severe. The yardage was right at 140 but Ralph and the other caddies in the group were trying to convince everyone to play it 150 and use the slope to bring it back. I saw it as a perfect draw at the pin with my 7 iron. So, I stood up there and hit a cracker that drew perfectly towards the pin. I thought for sure when it landed just short of the pin that it was tracking for the hole. How it missed I do not know because it ended up just long and left of the hole for an easy tap in two. Oh what a story that would have been!

Many of you may not know that the tees at Augusta are made up of two choices. The member's tees and the tournament tees. Even though there are five female members now there are no "ladies" tees. The members tees play around 6400 yards while the tournament tees are in a different zip code – it's long from back there and measure well over 7000 yards. I thought it was long from where I played but then again now that I have hit the half-century mark, my distance ain't what it used to be. All I can say is, thank goodness for hybrids and seven woods!

After holing out for par on 18 for a round of 76 (which I am very proud of) we all trotted off to the par three course. Now there's a course I can handle! The yardages on that course range from 70 yards to 135 and it's an absolute joy to play. Yes, it's just as well manicured as it's 18 hole sister and yes the greens are just as quick. Sadly we only managed to play there once. I shot 30 (plus 3) thanks to a triple bogey on the same hole where Justin Thomas and Ricki Fowler both aced in the par three event preceding the Masters last year. Oddly enough I never took more than a bogey on the main course. These short courses are tricky and personally I would love to see more of these courses designed rather than the longer ones, which are too hard for the majority of people who play golf.

This morning was a pinch yourself moment when I walked outside to see the day break over the eighteenth green and to the magnificent view beyond -all in all it was breathtaking. Like most courses that cater to major championships, the character of the course changes when ugly grandstands are put up. I know it's a necessary evil to accommodate the crowds but the patrons who visit the Masters every year are not even close to seeing the property in its prime.

What will I take away from my first Augusta visit? From the course – visiting the exact places where shots have changed history, like Gene Sarazen's double eagle at the 15th, Tiger's chip in from behind the 16th, Phil's pine straw iron at the 13th and Bubba's ridiculous wedge shot at the tenth, was positively spine tingling. How these great players pulled off these shots, I will never know. They all looked impossible to me! It just shows you how good these guys are.

People who have visited Augusta say how surprised they are at the undulations shaping the course. It's one thing to walk the hallowed ground but playing shots on these slopes make these guys even more impressive. Take number two for example; they all make it look so easy when they are going for the green in two. Next time when you watch, appreciate how they are hitting these long irons off a severe down hill/ side hill lie. And I haven't even talked about the speed of the greens. They were super quick when I played but I was told they were probably 1-2 feet slower compared to what they play in April. That's just scary!

The memories I will take from the clubhouse will be all the iconic things – the tree outside, the awesome pictures hanging on the walls from the early days, the letter the chairman wrote in the 1920's asking for money to fund the project to complete Augusta and of course the most recent addition – the Ladies locker room. It's all just so lovely.

I am back in Scotland now and finally back down from the "high" I have been on ever since the drive up Magnolia Lane last Monday. It's been an experience of a lifetime and I'll be forever in Condi's debt for treating me to Augusta. I have promised to repay her by being my guest at my home club at Monifieth in Scotland, she will love The Ashludie.....

