

SPORTS - GOLF

## Why Masters Champion Jordan Spieth Hired a Former Schoolteacher as His Caddie

A 'textbook' example of the randomness of the caddying business



Jordan Spieth, right, with caddie Michael Greller on the 18th green after winning the Masters on Sunday. PHOTO: REUTERS

By **BRIAN COSTA**

**78 COMMENTS**

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*Augusta, Ga.*

The man who celebrated with Jordan Spieth on the 18th green at Augusta National Golf Club on Sunday made his first trip here only three years ago. Michael Greller wasn't even a professional caddie at the time. He was a sixth-grade math teacher who won a lottery for Masters tickets and spent the day following Rory McIlroy. "I had a few beers and enjoyed the walk," he said.

Greller's path from standing outside the ropes to carrying the bag of the Masters champion is far more improbable than Spieth's impressive victory. And it reveals both the randomness of the caddying business and the way Spieth has approached the game.

When [Tiger Woods](#) won the Masters in 1997—at 21, the same age as Spieth—the man carrying his bag was Mike "Fluff" Cowan. With more than two decades of experience caddying on the PGA Tour, Cowan offered the kind of in-depth course knowledge that Woods, for all his prodigious talent, lacked.

But in hiring Greller, 37, at the start of Spieth's career and sticking with him as he ascended to this point, Spieth prioritized personal chemistry. That he went so far as to hire someone who had caddied

only occasionally for amateurs ranked as one of the bigger upsets in pro caddying.

“It’s rare,” said Mike Kerr, a PGA Tour caddying veteran who now caddies for Adam Scott. “You have to be really lucky to get into that position. But the way they work together, it looks like he’s been doing it a long time.”

In the more strategic aspects of caddying—knowing the details of every hole and advising on club selection and targets—Greller has been studious. Before the third round Saturday, he spent 45 minutes talking to Carl Jackson, the longtime caddie to Ben Crenshaw who first worked the Masters in 1961. With Greller taking notes, the two of them talked through every hole on the course.

But the reason he has latched on with golf’s biggest rising star has little to do with measuring yardages or memorizing breaks on a green. It is because of moments like this: When Spieth double-bogeyed the 17th hole Saturday, Greller didn’t say much as they walked to the 18th tee box. He mostly just listened.

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—Michael Greller

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“You don’t want to overanalyze or make it harder than it is,” Greller said. “I just try to be a calming influence on him. He’s very intense.”

Spieth recovered to end his round with a par on No. 18, a pivotal sequence in the tournament. And while it's impossible to assess a caddie's impact, the moment speaks to how knowing your boss can trump so many other aspects of the job.

“Ninety percent of caddying is getting along with your pro,” said Adam Hayes, who caddies for Russell Henley. “Knowing when to keep it light or be serious. He obviously keeps Jordan comfortable.”

Getting the chance to do so in the first place, however, was largely a matter of being in the right place at the right time. The series of events that led Greller to Spieth traces back to a chance encounter nine years ago.



Is there anyone in professional golf—or anyone coming up through the ranks—who can challenge the dominance of world No. 1 Rory McIlroy? WSJ's Geoff Foster discusses. Photo: AP

In 2006, Greller attended the U.S. Amateur Public Links Championship at a course near his home in Gig Harbor, Wash., as a spectator. When he noticed a player named Matt Savage carrying his own bag and struggling in the first round, he offered to caddie for him free.

“We offered to pay him and he refused,” said Savage, now an assistant golf coach at Florida State. “He just enjoyed being part of the event.”

Four years later, Savage recommended Greller to a childhood friend who happened to be a top amateur, Justin Thomas, for another tournament near Greller's home. Thomas, in turn, recommended Greller to his good friend, Spieth, when Spieth needed a caddie for the 2011 U.S. Junior Amateur, which was also held near Greller's home.

It was a marriage of convenience. Greller was a local and knew the course at Gold Mountain Golf Club from experience.

At that point, he had no aspirations of making caddying his profession. Among other things, Greller liked that it gave him a practical-world example to show his students. After caddying at amateur tournaments, he would often bring his yardage book—which caddies use to calculate precise distances on the course—into class.

"A lot of that is sixth-grade math," Greller said. "It's kind of eerie how much it translates."

But when Spieth won that first tournament with Greller on his bag, they formed a bond. In 2012, Greller caddied for him when he played in the U.S. Open as an amateur. Spieth's 21st-place finish there made him the top-ranked amateur in the world, which could have easily worked against Greller.

"There were a lot of people who wanted to caddie for Jordan," Spieth's agent, Jay Danzi, said. But when he turned pro in late 2012, Spieth wasn't sure how quickly he would succeed. He wanted a caddie who would travel with him throughout the year, regardless of how well or where he was playing. Spieth offered Greller the job, and that was the end of Greller's teaching career.

Greller's wife, Ellie, has since left her job as a kindergarten teacher to join him on the road. The two go together wherever Spieth is playing, their lives transformed by a mix of happenstance, diligence and the meteoric rise of the newest Masters champion.

"There are thousands of guys who could probably caddie for Jordan," Greller said. "But if I thought about that, I'd drive myself crazy."

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