

# Twenty Years of Giving Back

PGA Professional Joe Taggert reflects on how a chance meeting and morning round turned into two decades of the Vince Gill Pro-Celebrity Invitational

By Tony L. Starks

After a long mid-1980s day in the golf shop and on the lesson tee, Joe Taggert made a stop at the local watering hole. The PGA Professional found himself sitting with a couple of his members from Nashville (Tenn.) Golf & Athletic Club and four music industry professionals. As the conversation became increasingly jovial, the idea arose to have a four against four 18-hole match the next morning, but there was one problem: It was just Taggert and his two members present. They needed one more player.

If you happen to believe in fate, than what happened next was no coincidence: In walked budding country music star Vince Gill. One of the music men sitting with Taggert said, “Hey, Vince plays golf; why don’t we ask him if he wants to be your fourth?”

Gill agreed to join their group and the match was set. Taggert and Gill’s team won the next day’s competition, and the PGA Professional and country music artist sparked a friendship that lasts to this very day. That bond has meant a great deal to Taggert over the years, and perhaps even more substantially, their friendship has been invaluable to thousands of junior golfers across the state of Tennessee.

In 1993, Taggert, the former chief operating officer for the Tennessee PGA Section, teamed with Gill to establish the Vince Gill Pro-Celebrity Invitational – affectionately known as The Vinny. Hosted by The Golf Club of Tennessee in Kingston Spring, this year marks the 20th anniversary of the popular event. It has raised more than \$5.5 million over the past two decades to support various junior golf initiatives throughout the state, and the Tennessee Golf Foundation administers all proceeds.

“Hard to believe it’s been 20 years,” says Taggert, who turns 70 this month. “It’s been a wonderful experience and a tremendous event to be a part of. We provide support for seven First Tee programs in Tennessee, as well as many other deserving junior golf programs.”

The numerous junior programs that receive funding from The Vinny include the Tennessee PGA Junior Golf Academy, Special Olympics Golf, the Center for Courageous Kids and many more.

“If golf has ever had a better friend, I haven’t met them yet,” says Gill, a 19-time Grammy Award win-



ner. “Without Joe Taggert’s involvement in The Vinny, golf in the state of Tennessee wouldn’t be where it is today.”

For Taggert, The Vinny has certainly been a family affair. His wife, Bonnie, served as tournament director from 2000–07, before he semi-retired from his Section duties and took the helm as full-time tournament director.

The list of Vinny participants over the years is laden with star power from the PGA Tour. Past champions include Payne Stewart, Loren Roberts, Jim Furyk, Larry Nelson, Kenny Perry, Woody Austin, Brandt Snedeker and Sam Saunders. In addition, Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer have each participated in and supported the event. In fact, the last few years Palmer has hosted a four-some package at the Governors Club in nearby Nashville – an Arnold Palmer Signature Design – as part of an auction to support of the event.

A sampling of celebrities who’ve participated in The Vinny bears semblance to a list of nominees for the lifetime achievement honor at the Country Music Awards: Reba McEntire, Garth Brooks, Bob Seger, the Gatlin Brothers and Mac Davis to name a few. Other notable athletes to participate include Brett Favre, Don Mattingly, Jeff Fisher and Ozzie Smith.

“We’ve had a gazillion celebrities participate over the years, too many to count,” says Taggert.

A PGA member for 43 years, Taggert held several head professional positions – including stints at Carolina Golf & Country Club in Charlotte, N.C., Richland Country Club in Nashville and Nashville Golf & Athletic Club – before joining the Tennessee PGA Section in 1991. Taggert has had a rewarding career as a PGA Professional, but his involvement with The Vinny tops the list.

“It has been nothing short of phenomenal. I’ve met so many great people and shared some lasting experiences, all the while helping to impact the future of our game,” says Taggert. “To think, this all started from a chance meeting 25 years ago and a morning round of golf. This event has a special place in my heart and I’m proud to be a part of it.” ■

PGA Professional Joe Taggert (right) along with country music star Vince Gill established the Vince Gill Pro-Celebrity Invitational in 1993.

