

MARK ROBSON

THE WRATH OF SEVY

Sevy was one of my heroes. They say you should never meet your heroes but of course in my line of work that is inevitable. I've met quite a few. Sevy was close to the top of that list. For a number of years I commentated and presented golf's European Tour. I worked for SKY Sports and also for the Mark McCormack conglomerate IMG doing "World Feed" commentaries mainly on the European Tour.

This occasionally, or to be more accurate, often, got me into trouble especially with the then Director of the European Tour Ken Schofield. I'm not sure that Ken particularly liked my rather left field and sometimes controversial style. In fact if he'd had the choice I suspect he would have quite happily smashed me out of bounds very early in my golf commentary career with no opportunity for three off the tee.

Case in point was a Volvo Masters in the late nineties at the sensational Valderamma course in Southern Spain. I quite like being honest which is sometimes not helpful in arenas where spin is determined to be more important than fact. Actually I'll re-word that. Certain parties were keen that you ignored some uncomfortable facts and replaced them with wonderfully complimentary anecdotes and adjectives. This had never really been my style and it definitely cost me jobs through my rapid cycle career. I well remember the great SKY reporter Graham Simmons, when I joined SKY Sports for the second time (having fallen out with management at the end of my first spell), pulling me to one side and saying, "Don't damage this bridge Robbo. There are no more left to burn"

So there I am commentating for the World Feed on day one of the Volvo Masters and the Director cut up a beautiful panning vista of the stunning Southern Spain coastline. The camera moved slowly from West to East revealing the golden beaches and rows of hotels as we drifted from resort to resort. I was ad libbing. No notes prepared. Usually this is where I am at my most dangerous. No filter system. I just say what I see and all sorts comes tumbling out. I started, "Well look at that. The

fabulous Costa Del Sol coastline sparkling in the early morning sunshine. You're looking at Marbella. The playground of the rich. All super yachts, speedboats and beautiful people. And as we drift along the coast you get to Torremolinos and Fuengirola. Not quite as fashionable shall we say. Yes we've all been there on holiday haven't we folks... but we'd rather not talk about it... would we ?" I was quietly chuckling to myself admiring my mildly amusing train of thought and now I was on a roll. "And this coastline runs in front of the notorious A7 one of the most dangerous stretches of tarmac in the World. In fact it's known as the Road of Death. There are a lot of fatalities on it each year. Be careful in that dodgy hire car !" As usual, with my shades of black sense of humour, I thought I was the funniest man in the World.

All was well until I walked into the press and media centre after the broadcast. I could feel the eyes burning through my flesh. There was a small, swarthy and rather threatening looking man hovering around the interview area at the front of the room. Someone pointed me out to him and he hastened in my direction. He looked like Charles Bronson. But scarier. Before I knew it he was in my face frothing spittle in my general direction. I had no idea who he was. But he was most definitely animated and not happy with me. Turned out that a main sponsor of the Volvo Masters was the Spanish Tourist Board and Senior Bronson was the Chief of Operations. Clearly my whimsical comments had not been appreciated and the man from the Tourist Board had to be physically restrained. Through a translator he demanded that I be taken off the commentary and wanted IMG to make an official apology. As usual, as is my nature, I found the whole scenario mildly amusing which of course didn't endear me to anyone in the European Tour or Spanish Tourist Board. Anyway after much discussion the mood softened on the understanding that on day two the Director would show a similar panoramic and I would extol the wonders of the Costa Del Sol sticking strictly to a Spanish Tourist Board generated script. This went against my rebellious nature but I feared losing (another) job and did what I had to do.

But there was still much golf to commentate on and I soon reverted to type. Indeed in pure golf terms the week had not started well. The Australian Robert Allenby was top of the money list and in order to

collect his "Bonus" for finishing first in the "Order of Merit" he had to compete in this tournament. Problem was Robert had twisted his ankle and couldn't play and was in fact at home in Oz recuperating. But the European Tour, showing remarkable empathy, told Allenby that if he wanted to claim the dosh he'd have to fly all the way from Australia to Spain to hit ONE SHOT off the first tee. We had the weird scenario of Allenby (in fog which made it seem even more surreal) limping to the first tee and dribbling a shot off one useable leg a few yards down the opening fairway. My journalistic training told me that this simply had to be criticised and yes maybe I did go a bit over the top with words like "joke" and "disgraceful" but I never was one for red tape lunacy and to be honest I rarely missed an opportunity for a dig at rule obsessed authority. The European Tour were not amused so I was already on a warning before the "Bronson Affair"

Anyway not of this deterred me in my quest to expose the ridiculous. On the final morning I was out on the course early checking the pin positions. The 17th at Valderrama is a par five and in those days had a vicious little slope at the front of the green which lead errant balls into a water hazard. The greens that year were hard and fast and the last place (in my view) that you would put a pin was at the top of that little slope. Gravity would just pull the ball towards the water making it almost impossible to stop. It was with some bemusement that I watched the European Tour's pin placement chap, Guy Hunt, mark out the place for the hole on the very apex of the slope.

I wasn't on air for a few hours so I watched a few of the early matches coming through. The former Ryder Cup captain Paul McGinley was in one of them. He hit his second shot just right of the green and was now faced with what I thought was a (by the laws of physics) impossible shot across the ridge above the glassy slope. Six shots later he finally holed out and he muttered something quite industrial about the pin placement as he passed me on his way to the 18th tee.

I had my eye witness account and evidence that this may not have been Guy Hunt's finest moment. To be fair Guy was generally brilliant at this particular aspect of his job and didn't make many errors. This might have been one. Fast forward to commentary and carnage on the 17th. Ball after ball landed above the hole and dribbled slowly towards the hazard.

In fact the dribbles were so pedestrian that, in close up, you could see the dimples on the ball as it revolved towards disaster. So I said, "Today's pin placement on the 17th was chosen by the Marquis De Sade. I watched him do it this morning. A sly sneer on his face, a barely audible cackle rumbling from his throat" Yet again I thought this was not only funny, and definitely delivered tongue in cheek, but also, in a metaphorical sense, accurate. The European Tour didn't quite see it this way. Ken Schofield was not amused. I had plenty of commentaries after that but it took others within the media to fight my case. The Tour kept a close eye and ear and eventually the offers of work ceased. But it was a lot of fun while it lasted.

Which brings me to Sevy. It was the BMW International in Munich and Sevy's career was on the wane. At that stage the ball was flying everywhere. He disturbed Lord Lucan on more than one occasion. On the practice ground the great Spaniard was consulting everyone in his increasing desperation. At one tournament I saw him getting a lesson from a caddy who thought he'd "Spotted something" Coaches came and went as Sevy's once natural swing became a robotic malfunctioning meringue. But Sevy still had a short game and could, now and again, still produce some decent scores if the short game was sharp and the putts rolled in. But My God did he struggle with his long game. Another caddy (they are a clever breed caddies - born with a sharp and cruel humour) gave him the nickname Tarzan because he spent so much time in the trees.

Anyway in Munich he somehow managed to shoot 65 and of course, being Sevy, swaggered off the final green thinking he was "back". I was presenting the tournament for SKY Sports and doing post round interviews. Sevy was ready and so was I. The 65 had been compiled thanks to 25 putts. And his striking had been abysmal. His golf ball had started in Munich but had been to Cologne and Hamburg along the way. Sevy's true mindset, in my view, (I'd pay for this !), was reflected on the final hole a short-ish reachable par five. For only the 3rd time in the round Sevy had hit the fairway but yet with the green in range he laid up short of a water hazard. Surely a subconscious fear that if he had gone for the green a visit to the blue would have been a more likely result. Sevy made par.No birdie.

I was ready with my microphone behind the green and started with a gentle question. "Sevy talk us through that 65 ? An excellent score". Sevy waxed away crafting his way skilfully around the "truth" of his miracle return. Time for a reality check and my second question. "Yes Sevy a 65 but a lot of erratic striking and you only hit 3 fairways. I suggest that the Sevy of old would have gone for the green at the last and not laid up. Did that reveal your true mindset ?" Sevy's eyes darkened. I'm sure I could hear Hounds of Hell in the distance. Over his shoulder the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse saddled up. Let's just say he wasn't happy with the question. Sevy: "You say Sevy played the wrong shot ?" and then, as the sweat began to form on my back, he repeated his point, "You say Sevy play the wrong shot ?" Unexpectedly the pitch in my voice changed and I started to squeak. "Well not the wrong shot exactly but maybe in the past you might have been more aggressive" Sevy glowered and wouldn't let it go. He had me pinned. He made me squirm. In my headphones I could hear the entire TV Gallery in the trucks and the commentary team giggling away loving every moment of my totally exposed anguish on "SKY Sports LIVE" I was in reverse and recovered as best I could. At the end Sevy walked away and flashed me a glance of what can best be described as furious satisfaction. I've never been so terrified in an interview. Sevy, of course, was the winner.

We were staying in the same hotel as the players. We often did. Next morning at breakfast I was queuing at the fruit section of the buffet. You always knew when Sevy came into a room. He had an aura, a presence, and I could feel something close by. A kind of prickling chill on my left shoulder. Sevy was beside me and as he began spooning grapefruit chunks into his bowl he gave me this ice cold look and simply growled.... "HUH" My mouth went dry. I wanted to say something. To apologise but nothing came out. That familiar bead of sweat once again gently drizzled down my spine.

Which brings me neatly on to the Phillipines. Working for IMG and the World Feed again with the superb Jeff Harvey with me as Producer and my old buddy Steve Beddow as co-commentator for the World Amateur Team Championships or Eisenhower Trophy as it was more popularly called. The event was played on a course near Manilla designed by Jack

Nicklaus and the great Golden Bear turned up during the week. He had won the tournament as a youth in partnership with Deane Beaman who was by then the Commissioner of the USPGA Tour. I interviewed Nicklaus. What a great man. Memories of his Eisenhower days and some insights into his design of the course. The perfect gentleman. I was very nervous because here again I was talking to a hero. In my career I generally found that the greater the legend the easier the man or woman was to deal with. I think humility is, often, an essential ingredient in the sporting greats. Their big picture balanced view on life I think helps them deal with life at the apex of their sport and as a result they are more inclined to handle the big moments well. They seem to have a kind of inner peace that translates well to the chaos of the sharp end at the highest levels of sport. But that's only an opinion.

My meeting with Nicklaus is not the story though. In fact it is a mere incidental. The problem began on day two behind the 9th green. I was out filming with the superb cameraman Howard "Badge" Badger. There was a little mound beside a palm tree and there we stood in the melting heat and humidity. Everything was calm.

Until a "Course Marshall" a short, rotund and red faced little man who positively glowed with small man syndrome made his way towards our little hillock in his wee buggy. He was cross. For no apparent reason it seemed. But a rant was forthcoming. In a strange combination of broken English and phlegm he harangued me for having the audacity to film the golf from a "restricted area". I have never taken well to this kind of attitude and my default is to react with aggression. We were causing no harm. In fact we (as in IMG) were doing the Philippines the favour of filming their tournament for broadcast around the World. Basically free promotion for golf in his country. And here was this pudgy chap launching into mid rant for no real reason. Except that he felt he could. Power corrupts you know. The disease bites at all levels. Golf course Marshalls are particularly vulnerable in my opinion.

I was soon inhaling his halitosis and decided to respond. He was standing on the top of this small hill but below him and deliciously placed was a small wall that surrounded a water hazard. I reckoned that with one gentle push I could send him cascading like a curled up Armadillo into the water. I'd be doing him a favour. Might cool him down. And so

I nudged him. A firm palm in the centre of the chest. And off he tumbled. It was an unstoppable roll. Gravity was my friend. He gurgled Filipino expletives as he tumbled into the shallow pool. He rolled over the wall and his flabby form made a satisfying "plop" as he dropped into the hazard.

Marshall Man dragged himself from the water and now his repugnant early reproach had been replaced by spewing fury. The confrontation stopped short of a fight but he screamed and roared and was still in mid Krakatoa when he climbed into his buggy and sped off. That was disturbing/unpleasant/great fun I thought and hoped that would be the end of it. A minor incident.

We were still on the course filming when my walkie talkie flashed. It was our Producer Jeff Harvey who sounded agitated (understatement) "Get back to the clubhouse. Now. You're in BIG trouble. Meet me in the downstairs cafe" I did what I was told. Jeff met me in the clubhouse or as it would now be called "The Temple of Doom" I think it's fair to inform you at this stage that in the late 90's the Philippines were still recovering from the Dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. In his place was the more liberal Fidel Ramos but the old power struggles from the past remained. This is relevant. Jeff stayed as calm as he could as he delivered the terrifying news. "That bloke you pushed into the water hazard"... "Yes Jeff" I whispered. "Turns out he was a Four Star General under the rule of Ferdinand Marcos" Marcos, nice chap, was famed for his cuddly style of martial law built around violence, brutality and oppression. Thousands of Filipinos went missing. Would Mark Robson be the first Ulster Protestant on the long list ?

Jeff continued, "He has called a meeting in the boardroom. You will have to answer to charges of assaulting a military general" Blood drained. Bodily functions considered a spontaneous protest. A few hours later I was sitting in a hall way outside the boardroom absolutely shitting myself. I suspected they could do anything they wanted with me. A Gringo in a foreign land at the mercy of a brutal thug. A life sentence in some stinking steaming Manilla prison. All sorts of horror scenarios flashed through my mind.

I was called in and the sight that met me was one that I will never forget. There was a huge semi circular table and my chubby marshal was sitting in the central position. But he wasn't wearing his golf gear anymore. No. He was clad in his full 4 star military gear. And alongside him were another seven or eight members of senior army staff all glistening with stars on their lapels. I was sweating and shaking. Through a translator my seething four star chum explained what would happen next. I really did genuinely fear that I was going to get a prison term. Could they sentence me to death ? You don't manhandle murderous Generals in the Philippines without consequences.

I listened intently. It was explained ... slowly... that unless I delivered a grovelling apology I would be immediately extradited. I was hugely relieved. Extradition ? What a result. I couldn't wait to get out of their sweaty little country. But it turned out that one of the worst things you can do in the Far East to a man of importance is to make him "lose face" which I had clearly done. So I was instructed to do the most grovelingest of grovelling apologies. It was a monologue that Laurence Olivier would have been proud of. I called on every ounce of my broadcasting skills to deliver a convincing performance. The General appeared satiated. He gave me the Mother of all lectures and I was free. I knew what being in shock meant. And you thought a three foot downhill left to right putt was frightening. The boy Harvey had been genuinely, and quite rightly, deeply concerned but in fact we stayed for the rest of the week and completed our coverage of the event. Turned out the Philippines Tourist Board had great need for the Worldwide publicity after the long years of militia rule. The insubordination of a pip squeak golf reporter wasn't going to stop this little cog in their propaganda machine. With Jack Nicklaus in town this event was a good look for the recovering country. The President Fidel Ramos even turned up on the final day, made a speech and presented the prizes. This was a political statement not just a golf tournament. But bloody hell was I a happy boy when our big bird finally left the tarmac at Manilla Airport. "Stewardess. A large brandy please"