

The natural who self-destructed

Magic on the links couldn't save this great Jersey golfer

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HOBE SOUND, Fla. – There was a stillness, an end-of-the-road kind of sadness about him.

Rita Mercer sensed it the last time she saw him, sitting slumped in a beat-up armchair as he waited for his clothes to dry in the motel laundry room.

"He said he was down about his family," she says. "He showed me the picture in his wallet of him, his woman and a little child."

Mercer knew about the drugs, too. Saw the people coming and going from the man's room all the time. Sometimes even saw the drugs — rock cocaine, pills, marijuana.

Drugs and alcohol weren't unusual at the Heritage Inn, a down-at-the-heel kind of place wedged between trailer parks and self-storage warehouses.

What did seem out of place was this man. "He isn't from here," Mercer would tell people. "He's different." She just couldn't say how.

Around the motel, 44-year-old Jeff Thomas was seen as a loner, an alcoholic drug addict who managed to pull himself together every day to caddie at the golf course on the other side of Route 1.

What wasn't known by Mercer, or anyone else, was that the man who drove each morning from his \$16-a-day efficiency to the exclusive McArthur Golf Club was *the* Jeff Thomas — winner of more than 50 golf titles and the greatest amateur golfer ever to come out of New Jersey.

On July 30, Thomas' decomposing body was found sprawled across his bed, face up, in the last place on Earth he called home.

How he got there is the story of how a natural born winner, despite his gifts — or maybe because of them — was a natural born loser as well.

So good

There was magic in his hands, that's what everyone said. He didn't have a classic, controlled swing. It was more like a big sweeping hook, and when the ball landed — more often than not in the middle of the fairway — it seemed to roll forever.

"He just blew me away with his shot-making," says Kevin Kennedy, a teammate of Thomas' at Ramapo College in 1978 and '79. "He had such feeling in his hands. He was so good, he could have flushed a ball with a 2-iron off the hood of a car."

Off the course, however, Thomas was a loose cannon. In high school he was fired from a caddie job at Plainfield Country Club after he stole a member's Ping putter, and as early as junior high he was selling his own prescription medicine at school.

"Jeff was mischievous," says older brother Alan Thomas. "He'd always take a risk and get in trouble. We'd be throwing rocks in the parking lot and he was the first one to get caught."

A gentle, even outgoing person most of the time, Thomas had a buried anger that sometimes rocketed to the surface.

"He made more enemies than you could shake a stick at," says Eddie Famula, a former head pro who knew him in the 1980s and '90s.

Golf may have been his only friend.

When he joined the Ramapo team, Thomas already had won the first of what would become a record eight New Jersey State Amateur titles, as well as both the junior and men's club championships at Plainfield West, a public nine-holer directly across the street from the decidedly more upscale Plainfield Country Club.

Thomas won those early tournaments with a starter set of Spalding clubs with leather grips so worn they were glazed and slick. "He didn't even wear a golf glove. It was crazy," says Kennedy. "He could just flat out hit a golf ball."

Thomas was 13 when he began playing regularly with his father, Charlie. The elder Thomas had played on two state championship golf teams in 1947 and 1948 when he attended North Plainfield High School, and his competitive instincts were passed down to his sons Alan, Jeff and Chris.

"I wasn't bad," says Alan Thomas, a 46-year-old research chemist in Gilbert, Ariz. "But Jeff learned it so fast he ended up kicking my butt. I got so disgusted with it, he was so good. So I went and played basketball."

Thomas had tunnel vision when it came to golf. He played on the South Plainfield High School team, and two years after graduation was still playing every day at Plainfield West.

That was when Ramapo College golf coach Vince Nardiello heard about the former high school phenom and recruited him. A four-time All American at Ramapo, Thomas led the school in 1982 to its first Division III title in golf.

On the golf course, he was a brilliant manipulator of the ball — "He could hit it in his sleep," says Nardiello. But Thomas also enjoyed playing the role of the renegade — snubbing his nose at any authority figure he could find. By the time he got to college, Thomas was a heavy pot smoker and drinker. While other players arrived at

away matches with luggage and clubs, Thomas arrived with luggage and clubs and a case of Heineken.

"We had to take a vote whether to keep him on the team because of his off-course antics," says Kennedy, who now owns a golf cart company in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

At Ramapo, Thomas showed up drunk for a match his freshman year; he stole cigarettes and cigars from a store on a team trip, and cold-cocked Kennedy after he suggested Thomas stop ripping telephones out of a hotel wall.

"He had a world of talent. He had (PGA) Tour potential," says Nardiello.

"But it was difficult to have him on the team. ... In 23 years of coaching he was the only guy I ever kicked off the team. He also accomplished more than any other player I ever had."

When Thomas ran out of eligibility at Ramapo, he needed only 16 credits to get a degree, but it didn't matter if he couldn't play golf.

"I begged him to come back and finish," says Nardiello. "He was a smart guy. He got A's and B's without buying a book. ... But he was the most self-destructive person I ever met."

Time and again, however, it was his talent, his gift for striking a ball with a bladed club, that earned Thomas yet another chance.

"He was a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," says Tom Kaufmann, a bartender at the Polish National Home in South Plainfield who frequently played with Thomas at Plainfield West. "He was basically a nice guy, but when he drank he rubbed a lot of people the wrong way. Because of his talent they looked the other way. They thought, 'Hey, here's a guy who's going to be big; he's going to be on TV someday.' "

So people would hire Thomas knowing about his unreliability. Rarely did he repay them for the opportunity. He lost a part-time job as a bartender for hitting a customer over the head with a bottle, and lasted a week as a limousine driver before being fired.

When asked why they liked him, invariably his friends answer with a story, not about the man, but about the golf:

The 80-footer Thomas drained at the 1979 NCAA Division III championship; the time he beat another amateur, a friend, at Seminole Golf Club in North Palm Beach, Fla., by one stroke — while on crutches with a sprained ankle. "The first time we hung out on a golf course together, we were in the dark (at Plainfield West)," says Kaufmann, "and Jeff says to me, 'Hey, let's hit one-handed bunker shots!' And I say, 'Yeah, right.' You couldn't see a thing. And doesn't he take the first swing with one hand in the pitch black and sink it. He was amazing."

In 1983 and '85, Thomas won two more state amateur titles, then finished third in the state event in 1986 while still nursing a broken heel.

By the time he won his seventh state amateur in 1991, Thomas had piled up more than 30 titles. That same year he lost the Metropolitan Golf Association's prestigious amateur tournament, the Ike, in a playoff, despite tying New York's Old Westbury course record of 68 — not once, but twice.

No misstep

Thomas was more than just a prodigy or a super-talent. He was that rarest of commodities in golf. He was a natural. A man whose hands and wrists and hips moved seamlessly together not because he urged them or trained them to. But because that's what they were meant to do. Pure and simple, Thomas could feel his way around a golf course the way a panther prowls the jungle without moving a leaf. There was never a misstep.

"It's unbelievable when you think about it, but the guy never practiced," says Kaufmann. "He didn't hit balls every day like most serious golfers. But then, he didn't need to."

Thomas was proud of being a natural — the only one who didn't need to warm up, who could drink a case of beer and then go out and shoot in the 60s. It fascinated people, and in some ways, maybe golf was an enabler.

"Not everyone is an angel," says Kennedy. "Look at who people follow. ... People love the guy who can hit the farthest or drink liquor out of his bag. ... Golf was a game, it was fun, and he could do it and still party. He turned people's heads with his golfing ability."

At the age of 34, Thomas brought home the most important trophy of his life, the United States Golf Association's Mid-Amateur championship for players over 25. The USGA title earned him an invitation to the Masters, one of the PGA Tour's four major tournaments and one of the most coveted titles in professional golf.

The problem with being a full-time amateur in a professional world is that no one is there to pay your way, to pick up the tab for a meal or a room, to plunk down the 50 bucks to enter a tournament, even to buy a few sleeves of balls for you. It's a vagabond life if you have no other job. Even when you win, there's little glitter and only pocket-sized glory.

But the Masters, that was the biggest stage imaginable. In April 1994, Thomas packed his clubs in the trunk of his '72 Cadillac and chugged the 800 miles south to Augusta, Ga. As is the custom, he had been invited to stay in the famed Crow's Nest, a suite of rooms on the top floor of the clubhouse at Augusta National Golf Club that is reserved during Masters week for the best amateur players in the country.

It was an honor for Thomas — and, as was his nature, an opportunity to hustle.

Before he'd even swung a club on the hallowed fairways of Augusta, the first New Jersey amateur ever invited to play in the Masters had sold the half-dozen free family passes given to each player, and auctioned off the job of caddie to the highest bidder. Thomas admitted both to at least three of his friends, including Kennedy, who was there.

No one, however, remembers who bought the passes and for how much, nor what amount the "friend" from New Jersey paid Thomas for the privilege of carrying his clubs.

That friend, however, cost the amateur at least a couple of strokes in the tournament. Scott Hickey, another old Ramapo teammate, vividly recalls Thomas telling him about what happened when he reached the green in two on one of the most famous par-5 holes in all of golf.

"He was on the 13th hole ... and he'd just hit a great 3-iron to within 15 feet and he turns to his caddie and asks for the putter. The caddie had left it on the 12th green and because of the pace of play rule, he couldn't go back and get it. Jeff laughed. He said, 'Here's my only chance at Waterford Crystal and I've got to putt with a damn 2-iron. I could have had eagle.' "

Instead, he took bogey, shot 78 in consecutive rounds and missed the cut by 7 strokes.

The week was hardly a washout for Thomas. Before the tournament began on Thursday, he played a practice round with Arnold Palmer, then invited several female fans, strictly against club policy, back to his room in the Crow's Nest. He also managed to squirrel away three bags of balls from the practice range, each bearing the unmistakable Masters imprint.

It's unclear how much the people who run the Masters knew about his extracurricular activities. But they knew enough. The man who never met a bridge he didn't think of burning, was told he would never be invited back.

It didn't seem to matter much to Thomas. He'd had a grand time. When the motor of his banged-up Cadillac blew in Camden, S.C., on his way back to New Jersey, Thomas tried to pay for the repairs with a bag of the balls he'd scooped up in Augusta.

"The guy was a redneck mechanic," says Kennedy, who already had flown back to Myrtle Beach and bailed Thomas out. "The bag of balls with the Augusta logo didn't mean anything to him."

Nothing else

Maybe it was that he grew up on the other side of the country club, a blue-collar golfer in a silver spoon world. Or maybe it was that he just enjoyed hitting into the wind. Whether sociological or psychological, hustling had become a way of life, a kind of habit in support of his golf game.

"He never really had a normal job," says Paul Piccolo, a friend of Thomas' in both New Jersey and south Florida. "Golf was what he did. He didn't do anything else. I mean, I do a lot of things — I work, I spend time with my family — but he didn't do anything else. We'd go play golf and he would try to make \$20 or \$30 because we always played for money, or against other people. ... Sometimes he would go and pick up things in yard sales and then bring them back to his place and have another yard sale. So he would buy something for \$5 and bring it back and sell it for \$10.

Just to make a quick buck. It was always, 'I gotta get a dozen golf balls and I need some money.' "

Until he moved to Florida in the mid-1990s, Thomas lived with his mother in South Plainfield. On Nov. 30, 1990, he was arrested at home during a raid.

Police found 5 pounds of marijuana and a small amount of cocaine, as well as a black powder revolver that had been stolen from a neighbor. Two years after the arrest and out on bail, Thomas pleaded guilty to some of the charges (the others were dismissed), was placed on probation for five years and fined \$1,860. He also lost his driver's license for six months and was ordered into an outpatient drug treatment program.

It barely broke Thomas' stride. Less than a year later he won the Mid-Amateur. Thomas estimated that in 1996 alone, he logged more than 50,000 miles on the amateur circuit, from Paris to Mexico to Hawaii. The championships weren't in small regional events; they were in elite national tournaments — the New York City Amateur, the Mid-Atlantic Amateur, the Sunnehanna, the Havemeyer Invitational and the Travis Memorial.

Twice Thomas won the Metropolitan Public Links title, and three times he was named the Metropolitan Golf Association's Player of the Year against amateurs from New Jersey, New York and Connecticut. Golf Digest magazine named him the eighth-best amateur in the country for 1996.

That was the same year Thomas lost his mother, Joan. His father had died 11 years earlier, and his two brothers long ago had moved away from home.

"He looked up to Dad, and I think that was hard when he died," says Alan Thomas. "He went into more of a shell. And then when Mom died, he wasn't ready for that."

Perhaps it had been easier to be a renegade, to play the part of the kid who never grows up, when there was still a mother or father in the world. With both gone, Thomas' moorings loosened. He went to live in the small south Florida home in Jensen Beach that his grandparents had left his mother. When the estate was finally settled in 1998, Alan and Chris Thomas gave the house, outright, to their brother, along with some cash.

"I thought he would make a go of it then," says Alan. "I thought he might try and join the Tour."

Everyone who knew him thought he should, and everyone wondered why he never had.

"He asked me once if I would be willing to sponsor him," says 78-year-old George Niemczyk, who lived in South Plainfield for many years and knew Thomas from the time he was in grammar school. He caddied for Thomas in one of his first amateur wins. "He wanted to get three or four guys together to sponsor him, because he was talking about going out on the pro tour. That was when he should have done it, but he never got back to me."

"That's the great unanswered question," says Hickey, his former Ramapo teammate who was living in Reno, Nev., when he got a call late on Labor Day in 2001. Thomas was in town. He'd sold the house in Jensen Beach for \$50,000 in cash and was carrying half of it in his pocket and the other half in his golf bag. He'd driven all the way to Reno to try to turn his luck on one big last gamble.

"He was at a casino, five minutes from my golf store," says Hickey, "and the next day he comes in and throws a bunch of money on the table and asks me if I can hold onto it for him. I said no. He'd only been in town a day and he had won a lot of money. He stayed about six weeks, at several different casinos — Harrah's, Pepper Mill, Atlantis — and I knew that the longer he stayed, they were going to get him."

Thomas told Piccolo, his friend from south Florida, that he was up \$140,000 in the first two weeks playing blackjack and roulette. By the end of the sixth week, he was down to zero.

Hickey only saw Thomas a couple of more times.

"I went home one night after having a few beers with him at the casino, and I said to my wife, 'He's living the same life I was when I was going to college.' ... You look at your life. We all wake up in the morning and say, 'What gives us balance?' Work, family, hobbies. All he had was the hobby. ... I don't know what went wrong or why it did. But it did. Alcohol and golf. He knew the two things didn't go together."

Losing track

Thomas left Reno and spent some time in California before somehow getting back to South Plainfield. The drinking and the drugs were taking their toll.

At least once, according to friends in New Jersey, he overdosed and nearly died, before being revived at Muhlenberg Regional Medical Center in Plainfield.

When he returned to Florida last fall, he was worn out and broke and hadn't played competitive golf in a year. His brothers had lost track of him.

"We sent him birthday cards to the house and they started coming back. In the last year or so I was going online to find him. That's when I saw he was on probation in south Florida."

Thomas had at least two drunken driving convictions. His car was impounded and he served a three-month sentence at the Martin County Jail. Piccolo was his only visitor.

"He was doing drugs way back — painkillers, anything he could find. ... I tried to get him to play golf, but he was too shaky. He couldn't do it. He would try to hide the fact that he was doing drugs. He'd never look you straight in the eyes," Piccolo says.

Piccolo did manage to get Thomas to play in a couple of local tournaments.

The two were partners in a south Florida vs. north Florida amateur tournament in 2001, and they won both matches.

Just a couple of months before his death, Thomas showed up at a golf course in Port St. Lucie where Piccolo played every Thursday with several friends.

"I'd told him, you ought to come up and play with us. Everyone throws in about \$40. So sure enough he comes up one day, just shows up out of the blue, and he puts his money up. He didn't want to, he said he had so many problems, with his back and with jail and everything else. But he puts his money in and we go out to play, and he wins \$350. He was so excited. He said, 'You and me, Paul, we're going to play all these guys. We're going to take them. We'll play all you guys tomorrow. We'll be here, what are you guys doing tomorrow?' And I said, 'Jeff, we're not going to play tomorrow.

I've got to go to work.' ... We sat in the clubhouse for about an hour and a half and in that hour and a half, from the time we stopped playing, he was drinking straight vodka. When I left he was blitzed and he was still going."

What astounds Piccolo is that even though Thomas was deeply into drugs and alcohol, he still got up every morning and made his way over to McArthur Golf Club, across the street from the Heritage Inn, looking for a bag to carry.

Founded last year by six partners, including touring pro Nick Price, sports team owner Wayne Huizenga and the former Miami Dolphin quarterback Dan Marino, McArthur is quickly becoming a Mecca for the elite. There is no sign on the entrance to the club, but at the end of its winding driveway there is a helipad and expensive guest cottages.

Thomas, who had been a caddie for nearly 10 months before he died, was living on the edge – financially, emotionally and physically. But no one really knew. Everyone, it seemed, knew only a piece of Jeff Thomas' life.

His old Ramapo teammates, Kennedy and Hickey, didn't know he had two brothers. Neither did Kaufmann, who played with him at Plainfield West. And his brothers, who hadn't seen him in several years, didn't know he had a child by an ex-girlfriend in New Jersey whom Thomas hadn't seen in two or three years.

No one at McArthur suspected Thomas had a drug problem.

"We don't know why he stayed since the season ended April 15," says McArthur's head pro, Andrew Shuck. "There just wasn't much work for him. He'd come every day, though. He'd come in around 8 or 9 in the morning. He came in that last Saturday in July. But he only stayed about an hour. There wasn't any work."

In the last month of his life, Thomas was still talking about maybe joining one of Florida's many professional mini-tours. He was looking forward, say friends, to the possibility of joining the Senior PGA Tour when he turned 50.

Piccolo had his doubts. "He wasn't that enthusiastic about going and playing anymore. But he would try to talk himself into it. He was such a competitor. The last time I saw him, on Friday, we were hitting balls at the range, and he said, 'You know, I think I'm going to play in that south Florida tournament next month.'"

His hands shook, now, says Piccolo, when he got out on a course and took a club out of the bag.

"He loved golf so much," says Alan Thomas. "The rest of his life was a downer."

No answer

Mike DeStefanis tried calling first. "It must have been 50,000 times," he said.

No answer. He went across the street to the Heritage, walked up the concrete steps to the second floor, and knocked on the door of Room 234. Then he pounded with his fist. It was 1, maybe 2, in the afternoon and Thomas' car, a rusted-out white Toyota Corolla, was parked in the lot.

He pounded again. Then he kicked the door. Nothing.

DeStefanis was there to tell him he had a job for him. A member at the club wanted Thomas to carry his bag. It would be an easy 120 bucks, probably, and DeStefanis, who worked in the clubhouse, knew Thomas needed the money. He always needed the money. Thomas had been over at the club just the day before, on Saturday morning, for an hour. August was off-season for Florida golfers and only two of the 40-odd caddies the club hired every season had stayed for the summer.

On the first floor, at the end of the building, maid Elaine Kahle heard the banging. She thought it was nothing. The Martin County fire-rescue squad, just next door, received frequent calls from the Heritage Inn.

"We go over there all the time," says Lt. John Richardson, "usually for drugs or alcohol or hookers getting beaten up." Sometimes the calls came every day, sometimes once in three months, but on average about twice a week.

"You go in there and run your hands along the tops of the picture frames or the tops of the ceiling fans, you'll find needles," says firefighter Chris Wisniewski. "People come back and ask to rent the same room just to use their own needles again."

DeStefanis gave up knocking and walked down the concrete steps to the parking lot. Passing by the laundry room, he asked Kahle whether she'd seen Thomas.

"No," she said. She hadn't seem him all day. "Do you want me to let you in?"

DeStefanis declined, thinking either Thomas wasn't home, or that he just didn't want to be disturbed.

Sunday. Monday. Tuesday. Three days passed, and still no sign of Thomas. He hadn't called housekeeping for fresh towels in nearly a week. Finally, on Wednesday, Kahle and Mary Esmail, the wife of the motel's manager, decided they should go in. After knocking several times, Esmail unlocked the room and the two women walked into the two-room efficiency.

The walls of the 8-by-10-foot living room were riddled with deep golf-ball-sized holes — evidence of Thomas' indoor driving binges. A single club, an ancient Ben Hogan wood, leaned against the side of the closet.

Esmail called out for Thomas. No answer. Kahle walked through the short hallway to the bedroom in back. Before she reached it, the smell reached her. She peeked through the doorway and saw Thomas lying on the bed. Quickly, she turned and left.

There was nothing for the ambulance crew to do when it got there, and little else for the police except to call the medical examiner. Thomas' remains eventually were identified from fingerprints on record at the sheriff's department. It would take three weeks to find his next of kin.

When detective Tony Rodriguez visited Thomas' apartment the next day, there were few belongings to sort through. A couple of framed photographs included what everyone knew was Thomas' prize possession — a picture of the New Jersey Mid-Amateur champion with Tiger Woods, then the Junior Amateur champion, taken in 1994. In Thomas' wallet, Rodriguez found an old membership card from the New Jersey State Golf Association.

And on a table, not far from the bed, was a copy of Jack Kerouac's "On the Road," sitting in a sea of golf tees, divot tools and old tapes of music dating back 30 and 40 years — "Donovan's Greatest Hits," Gordon Lightfoot's "Summertime Dream" and Mott the Hoople's "All the Young Dudes."

Scattered about the floor and bed were several prescription bottles for oxycodone, a powerful analgesic and narcotic. Although the official cause of death is still being determined by the Martin County Medical Examiner's Office, Rodriguez is fairly sure he knows what happened.

"You can't live in a world like that and expect things to come out okay," he says. "If you look at someone's history, it's not very difficult to figure out what the problem was."

Rita Mercer, who lives at the Heritage Inn, says she misses her friend Jeff.

"He was like a big brother to me," she says. "He said if anything happens to you, you come and tell me. I told my husband I'm going to miss Jeff, and my husband says there's nothing you can do but pray."

That's what she did that Friday night, the last time she saw Thomas in the laundry room at the motel. It was a humid afternoon with the heat rising like regret from the baked blacktop that rolled out from the motel in every direction.

"He asked me where was I going, all dressed up," Mercer says. "And I told him I was going to church. I didn't have a ride, so he said he would take me in his car."

As he pulled his car up to the New Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church, Thomas fished in the pocket of his pants for a \$20 bill and handed it to Mercer.

"I never asked him for money," she says, slowly shaking her head, her eyes filling with tears. "He said, no, you take this and put it in the church.

"Pray for me, little sister," he said to Mercer. "Will you?"