

by Jimmy Roberts of NBC Sports



“With gestures both large and small, some of golf’s biggest names closed ranks to help the Dolch family.”

Helping Hands

If I had a dollar for every time someone (usually a golfer) told me I have the world’s greatest job, I wouldn’t have to worry about a college fund for my kids. Indeed, I am fortunate, but among the most persistent misconceptions about my work is that it’s mostly a traveling fraternity party with my “buddies” of the PGA Tour. I do, in fact have many good friends among the playing ranks. There are also those who refuse to talk to me. That’s the way it goes when your job is to sometimes ask indelicate questions. That is a reporter’s life. Which makes the way the entire golf community has responded to Eric Dolch so wonderful.

Eric is 16 years old and lives in Florida. His father, Craig, is the longtime and well-respected golf writer for the *Palm Beach Post*. Because he’s a conscientious reporter, Craig, too, has ruffled some feathers over the years. No responsible writer sets out to offend, but in telling the truth, sometimes it happens.

The Dolch family — Craig, his wife Ava, their daughter Alex, and Eric — were just an average family until two years ago. Then, while Craig was away covering the U.S. Open at Pinhurst in 2005, Eric somehow came down with encephalitis, a virus which swells and damages the brain. To save his life, he was placed in a medically induced coma for 115 days. When he emerged, Eric was physically, expressively, and verbally inert. Over the next 14 months his body was wracked with seizures, sometimes as many as 100 a day. His parents had to watch it all.

“You’re saying: ‘please God stop, stop it now!’” says Craig. “It’s the worst possible feeling to see your child go through that. The helplessness.”

Eleven months ago, after four hospitals and

10 surgeries, Eric came home to recuperate. The *Palm Beach Post* gave Craig a year off, with pay, and extended the cap on his health insurance an additional three million dollars. Still, the costs were crippling.

Then, the most wonderful thing happened. With gestures both large and small, some of golf’s biggest names — people Dolch might have criticized over the years — closed ranks to help his family. There was Mark Calcavecchia handing Craig a check for \$600; money he and his wife had won in a golf bet one day.

“I just told the guy to make the check out to the [Dolch Family] Foundation,” said Calc. “I figured they could use it more than us.”

Last March, Raymond and Maria Floyd hosted a cocktail fund raiser at their home course, Old Palm Golf Club in Palm Beach. Jack and Barbara Nicklaus were there. So too were Jesper Parnevik, Nick Price, Dottie Pepper and many others.

“We’re all here tonight,” said PGA Tour pro Olin Browne, “because Eric Dolch is all of our children.”

The event raised \$100,000, much of it going to buy a special van to help transport Eric to various therapies and for a renovation to the family’s house, so Eric could live at home. He still can’t stand or walk without assistance. His dad is still waiting for the two to have their first conversation in more than two years, but there has been a slight improvement and thus a glimmer of hope.

There is no happy ending yet to Eric’s story, but there is a lesson: You trudge through life with your head down, thinking nobody cares, and just when things are at their worst, people surprise you. It’s just that in the case of Eric Dolch, the people who provided the surprise was the most surprising thing of all. ■





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