

Now, the tournament breathes life into them

■ For Bill Britton, Mark Murphy and Bill Ittner, the annual Lowney Pro-Am Tournament has taken on a new meaning since it started 17 years ago

It was September of 1978, when they all were young. Bill Britton, Mark Murphy and Bill Ittner were on their way from Staten Island to Gainesville, Fla., for the start of another year of classes at the University of Florida. So it made perfect sense for them to make a detour to visit their old golfing buddy Bob Lowney, who graduated the year before, and was enrolled at William and Mary law school.

"Good news," Lowney told them when they showed up in Williamsburg, Va. "I quit, and got reinstated at Florida. I'm going back with you guys."

The apartment in Gainesville was everything you always suspected about college. "It was great," Britton's saying now, 21 years later.

"It was a big school, a lot of people." He shrugs. "We had each other."

And now, as it turns out, they still do.

Nobody figured on Lowney dying. When he did, his friends talked about getting together every summer, the way friends always do at times like that.

"We thought we'd get together, play some golf, tip a couple, talk about the good times," Doc Watson was saying. But Britton was afraid a backyard cookout might not be enough to keep people coming back. He was on the pro tour, on the first lap of the best career any Island golfer ever had. Maybe, if they could put together a real golf tournament, it would help keep the old gang together.

That was in 1983. Yesterday, Britton, 43 and trying a comeback on the Nike Tour, was back at the Bob Lowney Pro-Am, same as he has been every year, in a fivesome with Murphy and Ittner and Watson, and another one-time point guard, Russell Clark. The only difference these days is their old teacher, Jim Albus, brings most of the pros with him from the senior tour.

"You know how things get away from you," Watson, who flew in from Orlando, Fla., was saying. "If it wasn't for the tournament ..."

He let that thought hang there for a moment.

"That's the best part of it for me," Watson said, and it could've been any one of them.

They shot 59 as a team, 12 under par, two shots shy of another win to go with their only team triumph in 1994. They did some catching up, helped raise some money for Special Olympics. Had some laughs.

"I hadn't talked to Murph from last year's pro-am until my dad died," Britton said. "I should call him more. He should call me more. We're all very neglectful. But when we do talk, we're on the phone five minutes and we're laughing."

"You know what it is?" he was saying, walking down the 11th fairway at Richmond County. "I played with Russell Clark and his brother last week, and one of them would say something funny ... funny to everybody ... but it was funnier to them, because they knew what it meant."

"I think it's a lot like that with us," Britton said. It's easy, knowing what we know now about Britton's career in golf, to forget Lowney was Monsignor Farrell's No. 1 player

when Britton was a freshman. Murphy was No. 3.

"They made it so I couldn't make the team," Ittner said. "I'd go out and shoot 42 at LaTourette every spring, and think I was great ... and they'd bury me."

Over time, all the roles changed. That year they all lived together in Florida, Murphy became the cook. "Lowney was the student," Britton said, "and I ... I played golf."

"There weren't enough hours in the day for Brit to line up putts, floss, and eat," Ittner said, one of those lines that's funnier because they know what it means.

There was a time, in the early years, when they made the Lowney a four or five-day weekend. "Those were some good times," Murphy said.

They still are, even if jobs and distance and family responsibilities have cut down on the time they get to spend together.

When the 17th Bob Lowney Pro-Am was history, Jim Albus was sitting on a bench in the clubhouse hallway, cooling down in his stocking feet, a winner after all these years. Most of the other pros were in the parking lot, or already on their way.

Britton and Murphy and Watson and Ittner and Clark were still around, in no hurry to get away from the golf tournament they made necessary. Once, their friendship breathed life into the Lowney Pro-Am. Now it's the other way around.



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