Golfers trade their polo shirts for fatigues

by Tod Leonard

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. - San Diego State golfer Mike Wynn was standing on a platform, toes on the edge, five stories above the deep, dark blue water. The last thing he wanted was to step off into a free-fall.

WORKING TOGETHER - San Diego State golfer Ryan Citarella (right) and student Doug Karlson work as a team to get a 55-gallon drum over an obstacle at Camp Pendleton. CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras. MISSION ACCOMPLISHED - David Palm of the Aztecs' golf team celebrates after completing a drill, part of a two-day team-bonding experience on the Marine base. CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras. UNIFORM EXPERIENCE - San Diego State golfer Matt Hoffenberg leaps off a structure during team-building drills. Said one golfer: 'You had to find the strengths and weaknesses in everybody.' CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras. Wynn's foot was still on fire from his last leap, from 30 feet, when he'd hit the water with a tremendous smack. When Wynn reached the surface that first time, gasping, he shouted, "I'm serious, guys, I think my foot's bleeding!"

It wasn't, but the pain was bad enough that his brain was putting on the brakes: "Fine, you did it. No more."

Why, then, just minutes later, had Wynn, teeth chattering, legs shaking, climbed 20 more feet of ladder to the highest possible platform?

Simple. Because he didn't want to let his team down, didn't want to get endless needling for the rest of his college career.

The Aztecs golf team spent 24 demanding hours at Camp Pendleton this past weekend in military-style training to bond, and to have each player learn a little bit more about himself. That definitely included overcoming gut-churning fear.

"As soon as I got up there and looked down, it was pretty scary," Wynn, a junior, said. "And I knew the longer I stood up there the worse it was going to get. But I wasn't going to walk back down."

So Wynn folded his arms, stepped off that platform, his eyes bulging like golf balls. He hit the water with a thud again, but this time when he came to the surface, all he heard was cheering.

"Way to go Mikeeee!"

It was as if he'd sunk the winning putt.

"I couldn't have done it without my teammates," Wynn would say later. "I'm so happy about the choice I made."

College golf presents a conundrum when it comes to the team. For years kids learn to rely on themselves for results; then they get to high school and college, and coaches want them to do what's best for the squad. Easier said than done, especially when they're also required to beat out teammates in qualifiers to be a traveling starter.

Tournaments are played in fractured foursomes, and about the only time the 12 players on the San Diego State team are together is three mornings a week during fitness workouts.

Anything that can build team chemistry is huge, and Aztecs Director of Golf Dale Walker and head coach Ryan Donovan seized on the opportunity when the school's Army ROTC program offered to give the players a taste of military life. They accompanied a group of soon-to-be graduates from SDSU's Hospitality and Tourism Management program.

The players were challenged more than they imagined.

They arrived in the pouring rain on Friday night and the temperature didn't get much above a wind-chilled 60 for their stay. They were issued camouflage pants and jackets; they bunked with their sleeping bags in Spartan, two-man rooms; and they good-naturedly groused about the vacuum-packed MREs - Meal, Ready to Eat - that soldiers and Marines endure for weeks at a time.

Be it a vegetarian patty, cheese tortellini or Cajun rice, "it all smells like fish," observed senior Jamie Puterbaugh.

Junior Aaron Goldberg, being the leader he is as Aztecs team captain and All-American, attempted to lead a late-night charge to the base's Burger King, only to find out it was closed.

The early evening had been more sobering. The team learned to fire M-16s and other weapons, killing enemies in simulation on a video screen. The golfers were then treated to a leadership and teamwork presentation by Army Lt. Col Kent Rideout, a Desert Storm and Iraq War veteran who is the director of San Diego's ROTC program. The local ROTC is currently training about 100 college students who aspire to be Army officers.

Rideout's tank unit was among the first to reach Baghdad during the fall of Saddam Hussein. It seized one of Hussein's palaces and found nearly $800 million in U.S. cash. Rideout shared with the Aztecs stories of great bravery and despair - including the accidental battlefield killing of an American captain by friendly fire. It was Rideout who personally delivered the news to the family.

"One of the toughest things I've done in my life," he said.

Rideout, 44, is also a kindred golf spirit. In the early '80s he unsuccessfully attempted to walk on to a talent-packed Oklahoma State golf team, and he now sports a 5-handicap while playing out of Admiral Baker.

"Golfers can be very me-oriented," Rideout said. "We see that with our U.S. Ryder Cup team. The Europeans bond, and that's what I love about them. We have a bunch of prima donnas, starting with Tiger (Woods).

"This isn't an individual world today. You have to be somebody who can team build. It's critical for the future. If you can't do that, you're not going to have what it takes."

The Aztecs' mettle was tested on Saturday. In full uniform, they jumped into the pool at 8:30 and spent more than two hours in swim training drills. They did laps, jumped out, huffing and puffing, to do push-ups and crunches. Later they had to ignore ear-popping pressure and pain to dive 17 feet to the pool's bottom to retrieve a rifle.

Then came the high-diving, in which all the Aztecs, coaches included, went off both platforms. They were proud to learn later that in the accomplishment they had outnumbered the actual ROTC students who were there.

"The confidence you need definitely translates to golf," Goldberg said. "You have to step up and trust that you're going to be OK. In golf, if your swing is there, you have to let it go and trust it."

"The pool stands out the most," Donovan said. "They had a great attitude about it. I was a little concerned

that they might be anti-trying about things. I didn't hear one complaint. They experienced it to the fullest."

After a noon meal of battlefield scrambled eggs, the Aztecs traversed for three hours a team-building series of obstacles and physical puzzles that looked like something out of "Survivor." There were simulated land mines to dodge, ropes to climb and heavy barrels to carry.

"You had to find the strengths and weaknesses in everybody, and manage those," senior Chad Moscovic said. "It's a really good skill to take away."

More than anything, the experience gave the team a new perspective on what it is to be a soldier or Marine.

"Kids are dying, and they're younger than us," junior Ryan Citarella said. "It's a huge deal. I don't think they get enough credit for what they do.

"It opens your eyes," he added somberly. "We're just playing a game."

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