It's rough, they're ready

by Tod Leonard

Tiger Woods is wrong. That's what more than 56,000 people say.

Or maybe they just wanted an all-expenses-paid summer trip to San Diego.

Late last year, Golf Digest asked readers to write an essay about why they thought they could break 100 on the Torrey Pines South Course a week before this June's U.S. Open.

It was Woods who made an off-the-cuff comment last year at Oakmont that the average golfer couldn't best three figures in a battle with a brutal Open setup.

More than 56,000 golfers, their spouses and their friends responded with nominations. The prospects were cut to 2,500 and then to 11 who were interviewed and played golf together in Dallas.

On March 29, the final five were announced, along with the three celebrities the winner will play alongside, from the pro tees, on June 6 - Cowboys quarterback Tony Romo, singer Justin Timberlake and NBC "Today" host Matt Lauer.

The round will be taped by NBC for a one-hour special that will run immediately before the final round of the Open, and they certainly cast it with characters, like any other reality show.

There is a father of three battling inoperable lung cancer, a former member of the infamous MIT Blackjack Team, a retired Navy pilot, an L.A. cop, and a guy who went to Augusta State - not for golf, but for soccer - whose wife urged him to take up golf in 2001 because "it's what old guys do."

Four of them are already guaranteed to play Torrey South the day before the big TV shoot, but the winner will be chosen by online voting on gdopencontest.com that runs through the month of April. Readers can vote only once a day, but can earn prizes for doing so, including a trip to the 2009 U.S. Open at Bethpage Black.

The Golf Digest site is keeping a live tally of the voting.

A look at perhaps the three most interesting members of the cast:

- John Atkinson, cancer fighter

Atkinson, 38, experienced every young, healthy person's worst nightmare a year ago, March 29. The medical supplies salesman went to the doctor with an achy shoulder, got a CT scan, and received the horrifying news that he had Stage IV inoperable lung cancer. He's never smoked.

"It's the reason I'm doing this," Atkinson explained on the phone from his home in Omaha, Neb. "If you saw me, you'd never guess in a million years I had Stage IV lung cancer. I'm the guy on the street next to you. The normal guy.

"When I was diagnosed, my life was turned upside down. And you can give up or you can fight. From Day One, I've been committed to beating this thing. I want to prove to people you need to continue to live your life. Cancer doesn't control you."

After his first double dose of chemotherapy, Atkinson played golf with his dad, toted his bag and shot 82.

"In July of last year I went to my 20th high school reunion," Atkinson said. "I was playing with a couple of friends I hadn't seen, and I think they were expecting me to be bald. They were going to go easy on me. I shot an 82 and beat 'em both straight up. It was great."

Atkinson said statistics show that 60 percent of patients with his form of lung cancer die within the first year; 98 percent die within five years.

However, his outlook is considerably brighter at the moment. Atkinson, whose three children are under the age of 11, joined a clinical study that has combined two powerful cancer drugs, and so far, the cancer is status quo. It has not advanced.

"That's good news in the world of lung cancer," he said.

An 8-handicapper, Atkinson shot 94 at a major championship course, Hazeltine National in Minnesota, last

year. He has never seen Torrey Pines in person, but is hoping for a bogey-round of 89 on the par-71 Open setup.

"I'm falling in love with my hybrid (club) all over again," he said with a laugh.

"This is a really neat thing," Atkinson said of the contest. "From March until about last December, I had a hard time looking forward to a week from now. This was really the first thing that I looked at and said, 'You know, next June, I would love to be doing this.'

"I'm more than excited. If anything, I'm trying to keep myself down."

- Erik Norton, MIT whiz

Norton, 38, has played for high stakes much larger than whether his 4-handicapper pride will take a beating at Torrey Pines.

In the early '90s, he was part of the ring of MIT math geniuses who used card counting at casinos in Las Vegas and New Jersey to make a fortune. Norton was a spotter on the team, tracking cards before signaling the top guns to come in for the big take.

The teams were immortalized in the bestseller "Bringing Down the House," which was made into the movie "21."

"It was a pretty neat way to spend a couple of years of college," Norton said.

What's that got to do with golf? Nothing, really, except that the personable Norton has a go-for-broke style when he's on the course.

"One of my best shots in my bag is hitting the driver off the deck," he said. "If I get on the show and I've got 240 (yards) to the green, I'm going to hit driver. That's going to look funny on camera. People are going to be going, 'What is that idiot doing?'"

Norton maintains that he's a normal, nice guy, but he's also "fiercely competitive." He got that way growing up in Portland, Maine, where he was raised as an only child by his mother after his parents divorced when he was 4.

Now a married hedge-fund trader in Boston with two young girls, he rose to be captain of the MIT golf team. And though he jokes that the Engineers weren't a collegiate golf powerhouse, he still thinks he got a competitive education in the game.

"Nerves are definitely part of the equation, and I think I have that to draw on more than the other guys," he said.

- Ross Troike, fighter pilot

Troike doesn't think most civilians, including Woods, know what real pressure is. He says the heart-pounding stuff comes when you have to land a jet on the deck of an aircraft carrier in total darkness.

He did that in his career in the Navy before leaving the service and becoming a reservist who trains pilots. He now flies for Federal Express, and lives in Memphis, Tenn., with his wife and three kids.

"If I don't do my job, I'm going to be either treading water or not breathing," Troike, 38, said. "Landing those jets at night, it's a real eye-opener. You rely on what you've been taught, or you're going to kill yourself or somebody else."

Troike's dad, an Air Force veteran, taught him golf at age 10, and how he's a 6-handicap. His best score was a 72 on a course he said he had never seen, but maybe there is one thing that can jangle his nerves: Torrey.

"I'm very excited, but rapidly becoming more and more nervous," Troike said, laughing. "I'm wondering if my game is going to be ready for the level that Torrey Pines is going to be."

There is already one amazing twist to come out of the contest. When Troike met Atkinson in Dallas, they discovered they attended rival high schools in the same years in Omaha. Norton's best friend played with Atkinson in an all-star football game.

"A neat, little small-world moment," Troike said.

It's rough, they're ready by Tod Leonard