

# Bart's BIG Bet

“Peachtree Bart” has strolled back into the middle of the huddle. No. 10 is self-assuredly calling the plays again. And there is a \$3 million payday to the team opportune enough to latch onto the receiving end of the former Atlanta Falcons quarterback’s next targeted pass.

For 11 seasons, Steve Bartkowski, the No. 1 pick in the NFL’s 1975 draft, assertively placed his hands under the rump of center Jeff Van Note, took crisp five-step drops and pinpointed tight spirals over the top of defensive secondaries to his favorite receivers including Alfred Jenkins, Wallace Francis and Billy “White Shoes” Johnson.

Bartkowski was the NFL’s Rookie of the Year and a two-time Pro Bowl selection. He still remains the runaway leader in most of the franchise’s passing categories. Bart sits on the Falcons board of directors and is one of just four players in the team’s history selected to its Ring of Honor of all-time greats.

Exactly three decades after his trumpeted arrival in Atlanta, and well past his hanging up his cleats for good, Bartkowski is itching to go long once more for a big play. This time golf is the focus of his drive for

pay dirt.

Bartkowski, who resides in Duluth and plays out of St. Ives Country Club, has evolved into a golf entrepreneur since multiple knee operations sacked his NFL days. He was a co-founder of the ex-jock’s Celebrity Players Tour (CPT). But it is

BY PATRICK JONES



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF ATLANTA FALCONS; CELEBRITY PLAYERS TOUR



his latest call, the \$9.75 million Big Stakes Match Play tournament, that may prove the most defining score of his career.

A field of 128 two-man amateur teams from around the globe will compete May 11-17 in Mesquite, Nev., for what is touted as the largest purse in golf history. The winning twosome, which must stay alive for seven consecutive four-ball matches, will bank a Lotto Georgia-like jackpot of \$3 million.

There is a wallet-scorching catch to this competition. The entry fee is precipitous enough to make Ted Turner flinch: \$100,000 per team. It is also too late to sign up for this year's event; the field is full. For the privileged moneyed with sufficient bills to back up their solid-core golf balls, it is not an all-or-nothing roll of the rock, though. Golfers can at least gain back their entry fees by winning two matches before slamming the trunk. The losing team in the final will obtain solace by

then "sat on it" for a few more years. "The idea germinated again with the advent and popularity of reality television programs," says Bartkowski. "The time seemed to be right. Big Stakes Match Play seems to be where "Survivor" meets "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" on the golf course."

Specific details of the event can be found on [www.bigstakesgolf.com](http://www.bigstakesgolf.com). Primarily, competitors cannot play on professional tours. Recognizable names on the sign-up sheet include many CPT denizens such as Rick Rhoden, Dan Quinn, Mark Rypien and former Falcons quarterback Billy Joe Tolliver. Robert Floyd, son of PGA Tour great Raymond, is also in the field.

Bart, as founder and director, is forced to bench himself for the event.

Big Stakes Match Play will likely have even bigger antes taking place in the gallery. With the host CasaBlanca Golf Club just 80 miles up the road from Las

### THE BARTKOWSKI FILE

**Born:** Nov. 12, 1952, Des Moines, Iowa

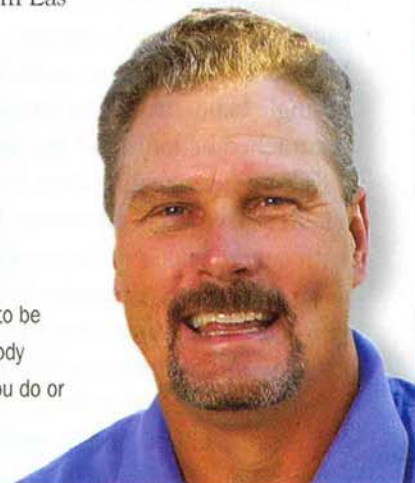
**Home course:** St. Ives Country Club, Duluth, Ga.

**Handicap:** +2.4

**Low score:** 64 in a Celebrity Players Tour event pro-am in Dayton, Ohio

**Favorite away courses:** Augusta National, Pine Valley, Cypress Point and Oakmont

**Bartkowski on golf:** "It's not going to change the world if you miss that 3-footer. We all want to be perceived as guys who have 'got it.' But everybody has their own choke point, if you will. Nobody succeeds all of the time in any given endeavor. Your life is not going to change that much if you do or don't make that 3-footer. The main thing is to keep it in perspective."



splitting \$1 million.

Bartkowski said the genesis of the upcoming event was more than 10 years ago.

"A group of us were sitting around at Wailea (Hawaii) Country Club after a round and watching the finish of a PGA Tour tournament on television," says Bartkowski. "One of the guys sitting at the table says, 'The worst thing he can do is finish in second place, and he's not even playing for his own money. What kind of pressure is that?' That comment planted the seed."

Bartkowski partnered with Atlanta attorney Jim Thomas to set up the concept, format and trademark patents for Big Stakes Match Play and

Vegas, the side-betting action may be more sizzling than the desert sun.

Bartkowski is hoping to complete a broadcast deal with The Golf Channel to televise the event in a series of five one-hour specials.

If Bartkowski's bet in Nevada beats the house, it might finally, irrevocably shake the ill-chosen "Peachtree Bart" playboy nickname cuffed on him by the Atlanta sports media in the dawn of his professional football days. It was a moniker that fit him as comfortably as a helmet two sizes too small, though, for a time, he tried to squeeze it on anyway.

"It's funny, it (Peachtree Bart nickname) was so

out of character for me,” says Bartkowski. “The media tried to mold me into this concept of somebody exciting and fun to write about. It was the whole “Broadway Joe” Namath kind of thing. To be mentioned in the same sentence with him was very flattering. Frankly, as a young kid, I tried to persuade myself for a while that the contrived image was who I really was, when it could not have been further from the truth. It made me tired and it made me less of a productive individual. Thank God that my life was turned around in 1978 when I became a Christian.”

Bartkowski certainly had the external gifts to live up to the shoveled publicity. He was the statuesque, strong-armed California boy with fetching dimples the depths of Cloudland Canyon, and a smile that dazzled with comparable luminance to the neon “Fly Delta Jets” sign that once dominated Atlanta’s downtown connector. Bart’s shoulder-length goldilocks, Cal-Berkeley smarts and \$650,000 contract, the largest ever to an NFL rookie at the time, made him the heartthrob of single ladies across the city’s hotbeds of unattached hedonism of the times.

Those freewheeling days, however, are a lifetime ago in Bartkowski’s evolution. Based on the anticipated success of his newest golf gamble, a more alliterative nickname for the successful 52-year-old businessman who has been happily married for 25 years with two grown sons is presumptuously offered up: “Big Stakes Bart.”

Bartkowski’s passion for golf was not cultivated early in life. He grew up as an avid hunter and fisherman. (For eight years, his Bart Productions video company produced outdoor shows that appeared on ESPN and The Nashville Network.) In college he was an All-American in both baseball – he played first base and catcher – and football. He was not even introduced to golf until he was 26. Fellow quarterback June Jones III, later the Falcons head coach and now at the collegiate helm of the Hawaii Warriors, took Bart out to Canongate on Lanier (now Lanier Golf Club) in Cumming for his first round.

Hold on to your visor for this one. Utilizing the hand-eye coordination gifts blessed on a chosen few, Bartkowski shot an 84 the first time he teed it up. The excruciating whiff-top-chunk-shank learning curve was never a part of his improvement process.

“That was pretty cool,” he says. “I kind of got hooked right away. I said, ‘Wow, I might be able to get good at this game.’”

His current plus 2.4 handicap is enviable evidence to that prediction. He became a junkie. Bartkowski succumbed to a dependency better suited for treatment at a Doug Ford clinic than the Betty Ford Clinic.

“Just like every other guy that has been tagged as a golf addict, I have got to have it,” he says. “I love it. I absolutely love playing. It’s one of the great individual sports that a person can play. It teaches you a lot about life, and it teaches you a lot about sport. It teaches you how to handle the good with the bad – and they come on successive shots. It’s a beautiful game.”

He speaks from experience. He has had wins on the celebrity circuits. He has also tried twice, without success, to qualify for the Champions Tour.

Arnold Palmer, unequivocally, is the player Bartkowski has tried to emulate since golf possessed his earthly soul half a lifetime ago.

“He is my hero. Arnold Palmer has always been my hero and he will always be my hero,” he says. “He is the best of the best and one of the greatest men who has ever lived. I had the joy of playing with him out in the desert in the Liberty Mutual Legends. It was the most memorable experience of my golf life.”

Bartkowski attributes a degree of his own success on the golf course to the mental rigors he faced playing quarterback in the NFL. For one, when he stands over a golf ball, there are no snarling, borderline rabid linebackers in his face threatening to bury him before he completes his follow through.

“As a quarterback, you have to immediately forget about the pass you hit the linebacker in the chest with and come back and throw a touchdown on the next series of downs,” says Bartkowski. “Golf is very much the same way. You have to forget about that last shot and move on to the next one.”

Throughout his 30 years in Atlanta, Steve Bartkowski has shown a penchant for quick transitions. For the most part, he has called the right audibles both on and off the field. When the winning putt rolls in on May 17 in southeastern Nevada, “Big Stakes Bart” will have capped the finishing touches on his latest scoring drive.

And maybe he will embrace a new nickname that better suits his style. ♦