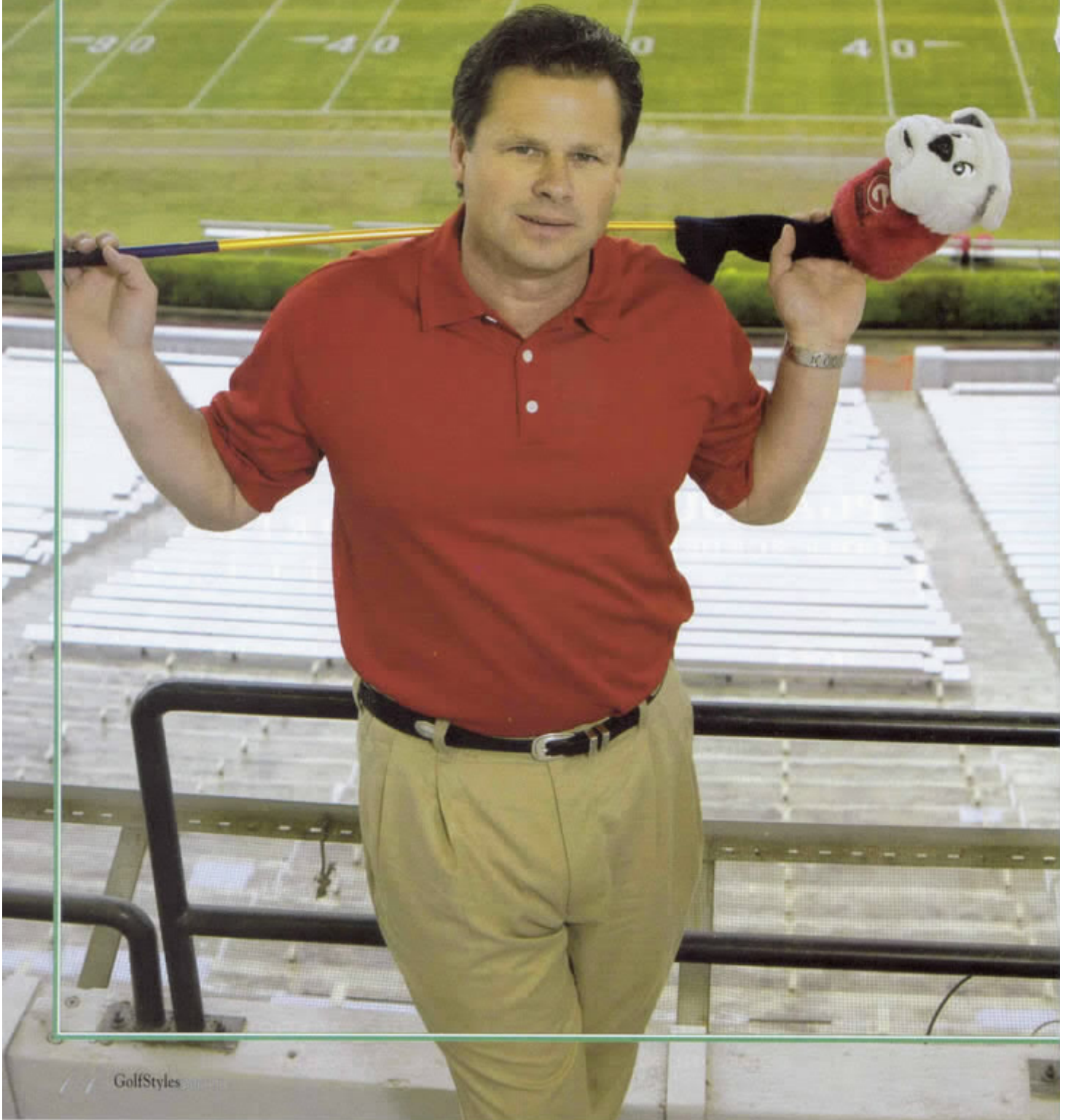


Profile

Buck Belue



BUCKING TRENDS

Buck Belue's penchant for golf helped take his mind off of the pressure of being the starting quarterback for the Georgia Bulldogs.

During that magical season in 1980 his Friday exploits on the course led to a national championship season.

By Patrick Jones

Like a bite on the hand from Hairy Dawg himself, the following revelation might arrive as a shock to the Georgia Bulldogs football faithful after all these years: Quarterback Benjamin Franklin "Buck" Belue III's golf game played a significant role in the Dogs' 1980 national championship season.

Sure, there were other determining factors: Belue's on-field leadership; coach Vince Dooley's I-formation offense that featured the nation's premier running back in Herschel Walker; and coordinator Erk Russell's defense, stirred by his head-butting inspiration, that suffocated opponents.

But it was Belue's novice golf game – "getting out there with the green grass and the white ball," he called it – that primed him to step between the hedges and deliver on game-day Saturday afternoons at Sanford Stadium.

During football season, Belue regularly hooked up with Griff Moody and other UGA golf team members for Friday nine-hole rounds at the

school's University Golf Course.

"For me, playing golf the day before a game took away a lot of the pressure that came with being the starting quarterback, and all the expectations that went along with that," says Belue. "It was really a wonderful release to be able to get out on the golf course and get away from all the craziness."

Vince Dooley was Georgia's head football coach during Belue's tenure. He admitted his surprise when recently informed that his star quarterback was hitting the links the day before kickoffs.

"No, no, I am glad I didn't know about it," laughs Dooley. "Not that it would have made much difference. But I am glad that I didn't know."

"I would have just asked him, 'Are you sure that you know what you are doing?' And he would have told me, 'Yes, I am sure. I am only playing nine holes.' If he told me that, I would have said, 'OK, I have confidence that you are all right as long as your performance is all right.'"

Based on his statistics, Belue's golf passion enhanced his performance on the field. Belue is the

only Georgia quarterback to win two conference titles and a national championship.

"Buck was a gifted athlete," says Dooley. "And he has that intangible quality of being relaxed and confident. That tied in with being a good quarterback, and it ties in to being a good golfer. He brought great leadership to our football team. He could run. He could throw. He could do it all. He had the total confidence of the team in him."

Belue, now more than a quarter of a century removed from his glory days in

tell them that (being the football star) was overrated."

Belue, who turns 47 in December, will remain forever lionized for his football exploits in a state that embraces the sport with zealous passion. He entered the limelight as a prep star under the legendary Wright Bazemore at Valdosta High School. Quarterbacking Georgia to its last national championship cemented his reputation. But it was his involvement in "The Play" that ensures his legacy.

The Bulldogs national championship hopes were on the ropes

Gonna throw on the run. Complete to the 25! To the 30! Lindsay Scott! 35, 40! Lindsay Scott 45, 50! 45, 40! Rim Lindsay! 25! 20! 15! 10! Five! Lindsay Scott! Lindsay Scott! Lindsay Scott!"

Georgia scored on a 92-yard pass play, won 26-21, remained unbeaten and knocked off Notre Dame in the Sugar Bowl to claim the national title.

"I don't think there's any question that was the biggest play in Georgia football history," says Dooley. "Not only for that game, but because of what it led to – a national championship."

Belue says that not a week has gone by that he is not asked about that play. Fans tell him exactly where they were and what they were doing at that instant. Most recall it with better clarity than watching Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon.

"I am just so fortunate that people remember me for being part of that play against Florida that enabled all of the Georgia fans to enjoy a national championship that season," says Belue, now a sportscaster at Atlanta's 680 The Fan sports talk radio station.

"Those moments were so precious that you knew it when it happened," he says. What he did not comprehend at the time were the perquisites that lay in his future for the rest of his lifetime from the grateful Bulldog congregation. "I didn't realize that I would get to play free golf 25 years later because of that," says Belue. "Free green fees. Who would have thought it, huh?"

Belue was a two-sport star at Georgia. He was a two-time all-conference outfielder for the Bulldogs and posted a torrid .447 batting average his senior season.

Belue was chosen the SEC's Athlete of the Year in 1982, but the award might have been revoked if voters had known about, and considered, the state of his golf game in his early college years.

Handicap index: 4.2

Best score: 1-under par 71 on two occasions at Savannah Golf Club

Weakness: Accuracy off the tee "is the thing that drives me crazy"

Strength: Hitting consistently good irons

Favorite courses: Golf Club of Georgia – Creekside and Lakeside courses; Peachtree Golf Club; East Lake; Bear's Best – Suwanee, Ga., and Las Vegas; Chateau Elan courses; Atlanta National

Memorable foursome: Played with former Pittsburgh Steeler L.C.

Greenwood against Bobby Cremins and Archie Manning. "L.C. and I won. Cremins made Manning pay me because he said, being a Tech man, he wouldn't pay a Georgia guy if he had to."

In the bag: 9-degree Ping G5 driver; Ping i3 irons; Odyssey mallet putter Titleist Pro V1 balls



Athens, reminisced that his buddies on the Bulldogs' golf team constantly told him he was "living the life" as the campus gridiron hero.

"I would say, 'Man, the people living the good life are you guys,'" says Belue. "You are flying all over the country, playing tournaments at all of these awesome golf courses away from all the media scrutiny and notoriety. I'd

against Florida on Nov. 8, 1980, at the Gator Bowl in Jacksonville. The undefeated Dogs were trailing with just over a minute left and backed up near their own end zone. Belue called the play and stepped under center. Georgia play-by-play announcer Larry Munson's call tells the rest:

"Buck back. Third down on the eight. In trouble. Got a block behind him.

He was still a relative newcomer to the sport.

"The only thing I could do was hit it long," says Belue. "Bombing it off the tee was all that I was interested in doing."

Belue had several friends in Valdosta when he was growing up whom he considered "excellent" golfers. One of those buddies was John Lastinger, who followed in Belue's footsteps as a starting quarterback at Georgia.

"Occasionally those guys back home in high school would let me tag along, but, since I wasn't very good, I didn't get the invitation every weekend," says Belue. "They used to tease me then about how bad my golf game was. I couldn't break 100 back then, so I have always been motivated to improve through the years so I could whip them from time to time."

Belue currently plays to a 4 handicap and has worked his index as low as a 2.4. He whips them from time to time.

"I didn't really get into playing golf passionately until I got to Georgia. I started practicing and taking it a little more seriously. I started getting after it a little bit. I sort of caught the bug in college, and I really haven't been able to let it loose, especially since I quit playing other sports competitively."

Belue was drafted by the Montreal Expos and played several seasons in their farm system. He also played quarterback for the Jacksonville Bulls of the defunct USFL.

Belue's golf improvement reached hyper-speed when he accepted a television sportscasting position with the ABC station in Savannah. He joined the Savannah Country Club, which features a Donald Ross layout.

Belue did not have to arrive to work until 4 p.m. That gave him the freedom during the daylight hours to post 146 scores one year. A pair of one-under-par 71s at Savannah CC remains his career low scores.

Belue joined 680 The Fan in Atlanta in 2000. He quickly attuned to life in the big city on a personal level, but admitted that it took a while to adjust his golf game to the faster pace.

"Playing all that Bermuda in south Georgia and Florida, when I came up to Atlanta and had to make the switch to bentgrass greens, I was so tentative that people were laughing at the stroke I was putting on it," says Belue. "But I have had time to work on it, and the bentgrass doesn't haunt me anymore."

"I feel really fortunate to be living in Atlanta and have this love of golf and access to all of these great courses," says Belue. "I am just thrilled to be living here and having the chance to play a lot of them."

Belue likely will always be best remembered for his outstanding football seasons at the University of Georgia. Playing quarterback for the Bulldogs was a memorable time for him, but he does not allow it to fully define his future or his family's direction.

Belue and his wife, Kelley, have a young daughter and a son, Braden Jax Belue, who arrived in October 2005. "He was born the weekend of the Georgia-Florida game," Belue points out.

He has already purchased plastic golf clubs for his kids.


"I have Georgia fans saying, 'Buck, you have (Braden) throwing the football yet?' I say, 'No, we are working on the three-footers, man. We want those three-foot putts automatic from the start.'"

After all, Belue remembers it was his buddies on the Georgia golf team who were truly living the good life. ♦

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