

Frenchy's Passion

BY PATRICK JONES

The ball is white and it is round – and it is silently beckoning Jeff Francouer. Since early childhood, it has been bred into the Atlanta Braves rising star of a right fielder to severely punish any ball within range of his free-swinging wheelhouse. What else is Francouer to do with this particular ball except to send it off on one of his patented long, wild rides?

Francouer, dubbed “Frenchy” by his teammates, takes a forceful stroke that unleashes the full fury of his powerful 6-foot-4, 220-pound frame. The scalded ball screams skyward and almost out of sight. On this occasion, Francouer has not launched a baseball for a crucial home run into the outfield seats at Turner Field. Instead, he has walloped a golf ball far, far away from the tee box. Francouer’s massive drive eventually comes to rest 330 yards down the fairway. It is as if he is saying, “OK, top that Tiger.”

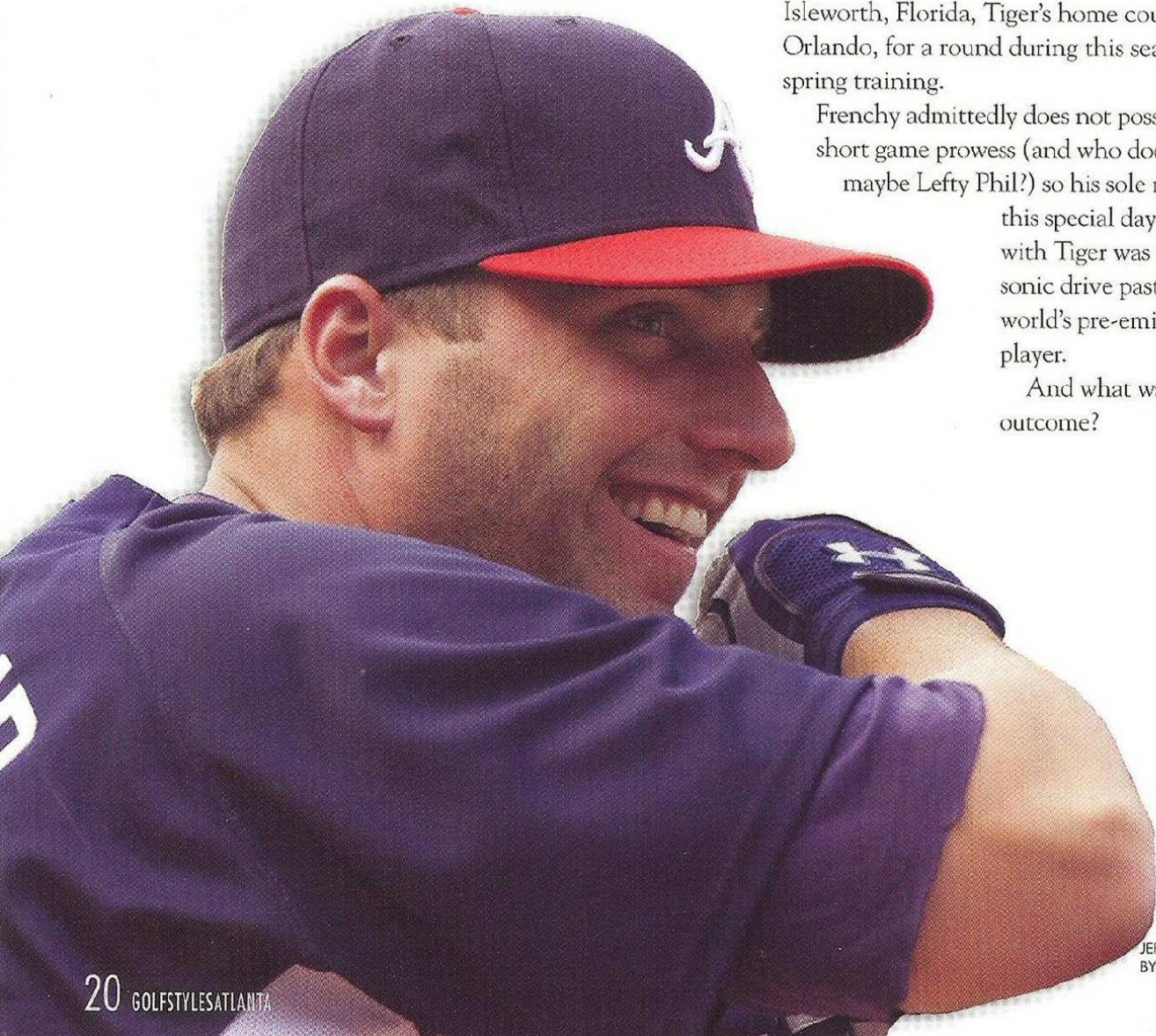
And, in fact, he is doing exactly that – with some playful trash talk thrown in for good measure – to the world’s No. 1 golfer.

Francouer and his Braves golfing buddies, a couple of future Hall of Fame pitchers named Tom Glavine and John Smoltz, joined Woods at Isleworth, Florida, Tiger’s home course near Orlando, for a round during this season’s spring training.

Frenchy admittedly does not possess Woods’ short game prowess (and who does except maybe Lefty Phil?) so his sole mission on

this special day paired with Tiger was to blast a sonic drive past the world’s pre-eminent player.

And what was the outcome?



JEFF FRANCOUER •
BY PAUL ABELL

"I could hit it close (to Tiger), but I wasn't hitting it too straight that day," says Francouer. "I outdrove him on one hole, but that is it. He is long. Tiger was not hitting his 3-wood that day either. He was pulling out his driver every time to make sure he hit it past all of us."

Most Atlanta sports fans know Francouer's local-boy-makes-good story. He grew up in the city's suburbs in

earned him a Rawlings Gold Glove Award in 2007.

What many fans may not realize is that the athletically gifted Francouer is also an accomplished golfer. His father, David, played collegiate golf at Vanderbilt University. Francouer's brother, D.J., played golf at Gardner-Webb University in North Carolina and once served as an assistant professional at Northwood Country Club in Lawrenceville. Jeff gave them both as

much as they could handle on the golf course.

"I think I played my first round of golf at (age) three," says Francouer. "Golf has maybe been my first love. For me, it was always my escape. I love the competition and how hard it is. It is a lot of fun for me because every time I go out it presents a new challenge. I do relax when I play, but I am also very focused and try to do the best I can. It is trying to master something that you cannot master. It is impossible. To me it is as hard as baseball as far as you fail so much. (Top baseball batters get a hit three out of 10 tries.) But it is that one 330-yard drive with a little pitching wedge in and making the birdie putt that keeps you coming back."

Francouer plays to a 4.6 index, enviable for most, but claims his game was even better when barely a teen-ager. "I probably played my best golf ever when I was about 13 or 14. I got my handicap to around a three because I was playing all the time." He was a regular at Mystery Valley Golf Course in Lithonia, Stone Mountain Golf Club and The Champions Club of Gwinnett (now called The Trophy Club of Gwinnett). The latter was just around the corner from his boyhood home.

"We would go out there about every Saturday and Sunday and play. We would go to church on Sunday, then go the golf course and play until sundown," he says. "D.J. also worked at Stone Mountain Golf Club for



JEFF FRANCOUER PLAYS FROM A BUNKER • BY PAUL ABELL

Gwinnett County. Francouer was a multi-sport athlete at Lilburn's Parkview High School. He batted .443 with 55 homeruns in high school and led his team to a state championship. His prowess on the football field was equally impressive. In his senior season, Francouer intercepted 15 passes as a defensive back and scored 14 touchdowns as a wide receiver. The Panthers won back-to-back state championships in his final two seasons. Francouer was offered a full scholarship to play football at Clemson, but instead chose to sign a baseball contract in 2002 with his hometown Braves.

After a quick tour through the minor-league system, Francouer joined the big-league team in Atlanta in 2005. No. 7 has since become a fan favorite, inspiring his own legion of well-meaning zealots – "Francouer's Franks" is what they call themselves – that come to games dressed up in hotdog costumes. Francouer's solid defensive skills and penchant for throwing out base runners have already

He's Got Game

Driver: Nike with 7.5 degree loft

(given to him by Tiger)

Irons: Cleveland

Wedges: Titleist

Handicap index: 4.6

Best score: 70 at East Lake CC, Atlanta

Memberships: Hawks Ridge, Ball Ground, Georgia, and Frederica Golf Club, St. Simons Island, Georgia

Favorite golf courses: Merion, Butler National, Pacific Dunes, Whistling Straits, Frederica

Likes to play with: Tom Glavine, John Smoltz, Tiger Woods at Isleworth; Dad, brother, and brother-in-law

a while. I would go out there with him after he got off of work in the afternoon and we would play until nighttime. I was shooting 74s and 75s pretty consistently.”

Francouer’s golf seasoning also included competing in sanctioned tournaments hosted by the Atlanta Junior Golf Association and the American Junior Golf Association.

His fervor for the game as a youth led to building a mini-course in the backyard. It made for a great time, Francouer says, while it lasted. “We created a couple of golf holes and put a sand trap in. We finally had to cover the sand trap up because I skulled a couple of balls and broke out some windows. My parents got tired of paying for new ones.”

His budding golf game was also hampered by his overabundance of physical skills in other arenas. When Francouer entered high school, he says “golf was done for me as far as playing competitively” due to the commitments required of him to star in both football and baseball.

He has now reached the top of his profession in baseball, but Francouer’s lifetime enjoyment of golf has far from waned. As evidence, and he may not want the following words repeated come time for contract renegotiations, but Frenchy says he gets more enjoyment ripping one of his 330-yard tee shots “right down the pipe” than he does in planting a homerun into the seats. There are caveats to that surprising statement. “I will take the great drive over the homerun, but that also requires hitting the approach shot close and then rolling in the putt.” Francouer briefly hesitates after that comment. “Unless we are talking about a game-winning homerun, then I’ll go with the walk-off homerun. Otherwise, I would rather have a birdie or an eagle.” (Francouer is the proud owner of a double eagle after once holing a 3-iron from 222 yards on a par-5 hole at Kelly Plantation in Florida.)

His baseball off-season is partially filled with weeklong, 36-holes-per day golf trips with family and friends. Spring training is another prime time for Francouer to get in his fill of golf with teammates and, on occasion, Tiger.

Frenchy says he sees several similarities between the two sports that take advantage of his high-velocity swing speed.

“First, (baseball and golf) are a lot in the same in that you have to attack the ball,” he says. “You can’t just stand there and let it happen. You have to be on the

aggressive side.”

Second, Francouer says, both require a tenacity to succeed.

“You have to be mentally tough and try to get through things. There are going to be days playing golf when you don’t have your ‘A’ game. You have to hit irons off the tee and try to make a lot of pars and, hopefully, the birdies will fall eventually. You have to be mentally tough to keep things going. It is the same thing in baseball. You are not going to feel great everyday, but you have to find a way to get a hit, or sacrifice the runner over, or do something good to help the team.

“Maybe 25 percent of the time on the golf course you are going to feel great, and you can drive it down the middle every time, and you don’t have to pull out your 3-wood,” adds Francouer. “You have confidence to go for it. And there are a lot of times when you have no confidence, and those are the days when you have to strap it on and just try to get it right.”

Based on his “strap it on” reference, it is little surprise that the almost-a-Clemson Tiger Francouer, now 24, has not extinguished his passion for football. In truth, he says his plans after his professional baseball playing career is finished are to coach football and to play “a lot of golf” with some future Francouers.

“I would love to coach high school football,” says Francouer, who married high school sweetheart Catie McCoy in November 2007. “And I would love to play golf, and have kids of my own that love to play golf, and enjoy being out on the golf course with them.”

For now, Francouer basks in his childhood dream come true of starring for his hometown Braves and hanging out in the clubhouse and on the golf course with Smoltz and Glavine, a pair of players that he once revered. (Francouer was an 11-year-old kid when Smoltz and Glavine led the Braves to a World Series title in 1995. He reminds his pair of 40-something buddies of this as often as he can slip in the jab.)

“My first year, I was in awe of being around them all the time,” says Francouer. “Now, it is just fun. I get the chance to play golf with them and hang out with them and enjoy it. That’s the fun part. Baseball is great, but you also go out on the road and get to play some golf and go out to dinner with the other guys. Those are the fun days and the days that I think we cherish as teammates and friends. And we enjoy a lot of laughs on the golf course.”

Life, it appears, continues to be a complete ball for Jeff Francouer. ■