

the  
**golden  
voice**  
of golf

by Craig Dolch  
photo by Scott Halleran

## Talk show host Peter Kessler reflects on golf history, his rise to fame and a strange connection to his idol.

**I**t all started with a one-sentence item in USA Today in late 1993. Peter Kessler was making a nice living in New York as a Wall Street marketer and the voice of HBO Sports when he saw something that caught his eye and changed his world.

There was a small mention of an around-the-clock golf network that was about to be formed. Kessler, who had lived on the same all-golf diet for most of his adult life, suddenly stopped worrying about a bear market and started thinking about the Golden Bear.

Kessler began asking his buddies at HBO if they knew anything about this golf channel, when it would start, where it would be situated and how could he get involved. He eventually got his answer when an HBO producer named Michael Whelan called him at home.

"He left a message" Kessler says, "that said, 'I'm the next executive producer of The Golf Channel. Wanna talk?' And he hangs up."

Kessler pauses for effect.

"Nobody ever returned a phone call quicker."

And that's how it happened, how a middle-aged man who had never been in front of a camera, made a career change that would leave him as one of the most identifiable, most influential, most exposed figures in golf. All one has to do is tune in The Golf Channel — and about 30 million people do so every week — to catch a glimpse of Peter Kessler.

He appears on your television set about as often as Tiger Woods appears on the leaderboard. For most ardent golf fans, Kessler's as much a part of your den as a lazy chair while he continues to serve as the primary host for the network's three popular interactive shows: "Golf Talk Live," "Golf Academy Live" and "Viewers Forum."

There Kessler was in January, conducting one of the most dramatic interviews in the sport's history as he continually grilled legendary Arnold Palmer — the network's chairman of the board — on Palmer's endorsement of the ERC II, a driver the USGA has deemed illegal because it makes the ball travel too far.

At one point, Palmer threatened to punch Kessler in the nose if he even insinuated that Palmer was

"cheating" by using the illegal club in practice rounds. The tension was so thick you could cut it with a 2-iron, before Kessler flashed that wide smile of his, intoned a few words from his deep baritone voice and you knew everything would be fine again. And it was.

The next night Kessler was back on the air trying to make a nervous club professional relax so he could make sense out of the technicalities of a polished golf swing. The next night he's trying to make a couple of sports writers make sense without the use of a backspace.

In all, Kessler has hosted more than 1,000 hours of live television since the Orlando-based network came on the air more than six years ago, with many of these shows being replayed several times to fill the around-the-clock schedule. Kessler has a house in Winter Park, but he seems most at home in TGC's studios where he can show off his incredible knowledge of the history of the game.

It may not be a stretch when some people say Kessler is to golf what the late John Facenda was to the NFL. Both were blessed with voices that gave them an air of more than just describing the action. If there is a Voice of Golf, Kessler would be among the top three

finalists.

"I've never looked at myself in those terms," Kessler says. "I'm lucky enough to be one of the voices."

Kessler is lucky, all right. How else to explain what has happened to him during the past eight years? How many people do you know who have never sniffed show business by age 40, then are transformed into household names before they're 50 (Kessler recently turned 49)? It's as if this game he loves so much has given Kessler's own career the perfect mulligan.

"Most of the people I know in this business started at Dubuque, Iowa, or some other small town, unless they were an ex-player," said Lee Siegel, who produces Kessler's shows. "When you stop and look at where Peter was, and where he is today, it's a pretty amazing story."

Because of his demands at the studio, Kessler doesn't go to many tournaments, usually just the majors or some other events in

Florida. But when he walks inside the yellow ropes with other journalists, fans recognize him more than they do most 10-year veteran golfers. Jupiter resident Tim Rosaforte, a longtime golf writer who's spent more on-air time with Kessler than anyone else, says he's amazed at the level of interest generated by someone who's never played the sport professionally (though Kessler had a 2-handicap when he won the club championship at La Costa in 1976).

"Everywhere I go, people recognize me from The Golf Channel, and within five seconds they ask me about Peter Kessler and what's he like," Rosaforte said. "They're always extremely complimentary of the work he has done."

This wasn't the first time Kessler found quick success as an announcer. When he was in his late 30s he started doing voice-over work to see if he could make some money from his voice. This led to him becoming the narrator of an HBO baseball documentary, "When It Was a Game," which won awards and opened doors for him. Kessler downplays his role in this project.

"The next person I see could have narrated it, and it still would have won a bunch of awards,"

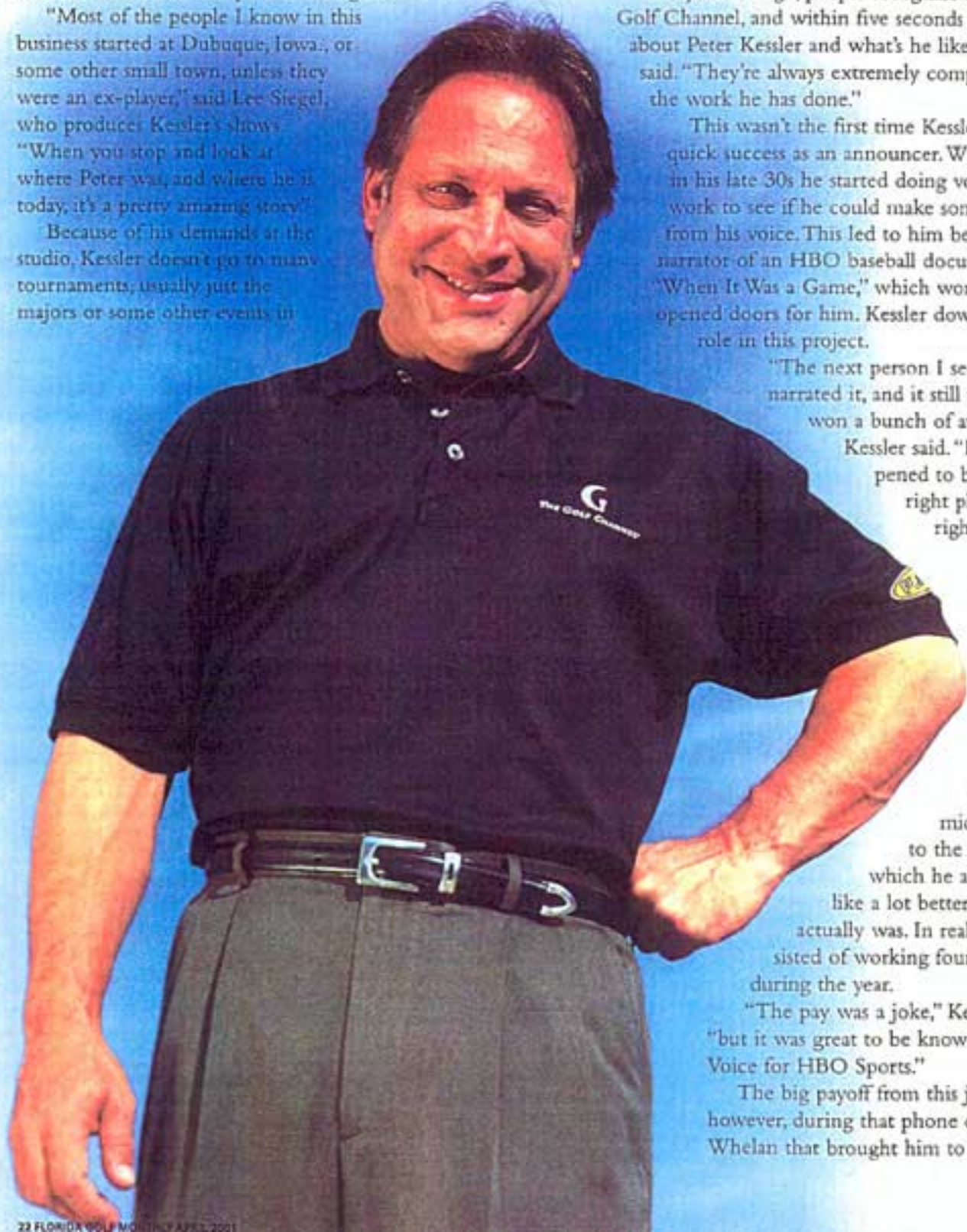
Kessler said. "I just happened to be in the right place at the right time."

The documentary helped Kessler become the voice of HBO

Sports from the middle of 1991 to the end of 1994, which he admits sounds like a lot better job than it actually was. In reality, it consisted of working four Fridays during the year.

"The pay was a joke," Kessler says, "but it was great to be known as 'The Voice for HBO Sports.'"

The big payoff from this job came, however, during that phone call from Whelan that brought him to TGC. Not



surprisingly, Kessler often heard complaints that he had never paid his dues to quickly reach such a lofty position in the cutthroat business of sports announcing. But Kessler has been preparing for a career in golf from the time he first became a teenager.

He remembers growing up in New Jersey and following his parents to the local country club, where he would sneak out by himself before dinner to play a couple of holes with borrowed clubs until darkness sent him back inside. Then he had a life-changing experience on his 13th birthday.

"Somebody gave me Bobby Jones' *'Down The Fairway,'*" Kessler said, "and that was the beginning of the end. I completely fell in love with him and I completely fell in love with golf history."

Kessler immersed himself in the sport by reading every golf book he could find, helping him to acquire the encyclopedic knowledge of the game's history he uses so effectively on the show. For instance, during the Palmer interview, he quickly recalled the five-year period when the USGA allowed steel-shafted drivers and the Royal and Ancient did not.

There are times when Kessler's penchant for dropping golf minutia during one of his shows is a source of levity at the network. "I'll ask him, 'Where in the heck did you pull that one from?'" fellow TGC announcer Kelly Tilghman says. "He does have a deep knowledge of the game."

Without it, Kessler might not have ever gotten the job. Whelan was willing to overlook the fact that Kessler had never been in front of a camera before, but he had to make sure his first major hire would come off as an expert in front of golf-savvy viewers. So he would call Kessler at odd times and ask him a golf trivia question. Kessler not only knew the answer, he would go into such detail Whelan knew he had the right guy.

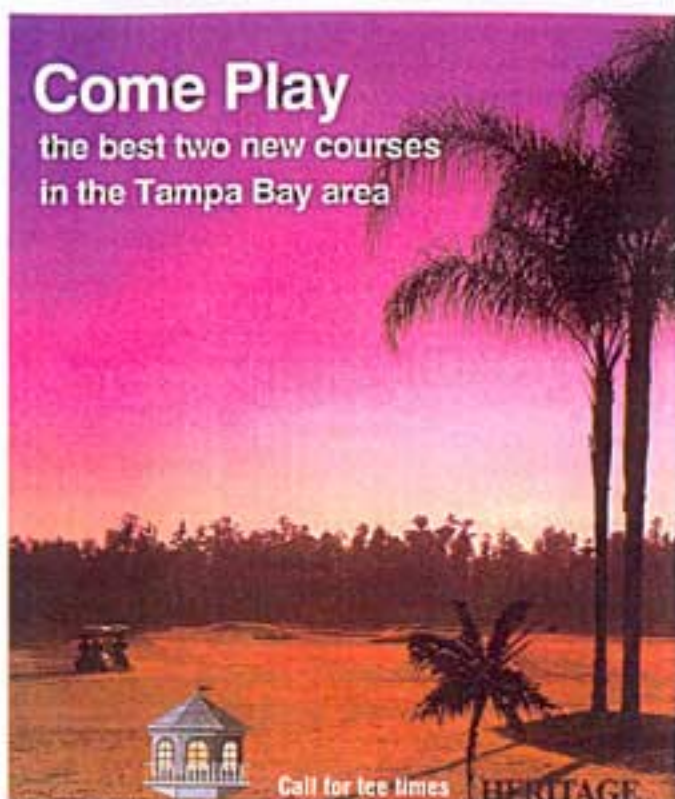
"I've been in this business about 20 years, and I've never met anyone who knew more about their sport than Peter did about golf," said Whelan, who left the network two years ago. "Peter's passion for the game is shown through his knowledge."

Kessler was the announcer who spoke the first words when TGC came on the air Jan. 17, 1995 — "I'm Peter Kessler and welcome to GolfTalk Live" — when he interviewed Palmer, who co-founded the network with Joe Gibbs. Despite his lack of TV background, Kessler was given a lot of autonomy from the start. People in the business call it "creative control."

Kessler had the freedom to do the shows just about any way he wanted, even to the point where producer Siegel would let his announcer make some of the more difficult choices, a rarity in this business. "I would be foolish not to defer to him on a number of topics."

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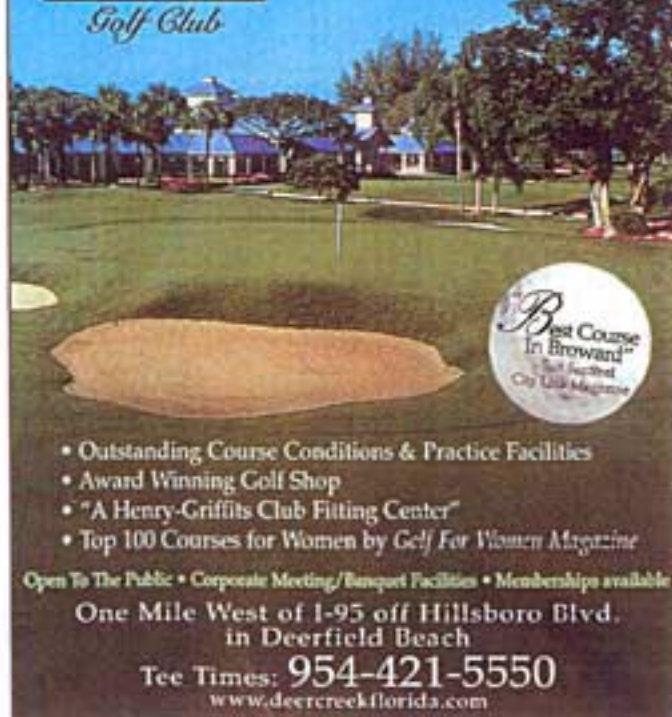
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He did so with Palmer and he grilled PGA Tour Commissioner Tom Finchem over his handling of the Casey Martin cart case.

"If there's an issue, I'll go after it," Kessler said. "But that's obviously not the case most nights. My philosophy is to try and make the guests look as good as possible and to give our audience a sense of the guest they otherwise could never get."

Of course, Kessler could speak gibberish, and it would still sound eloquent coming out of his baritone that has been made huskier through years of smoking. He knows he was given the gift of good pipes, but believes it's more than the tenor of his voice that has taken him where he is.

"People obviously say things about it, but I hope it's the least important thing," Kessler says. "An actor wants to be told his work is good, not that he's handsome. This is just how I talk."

One of his favorite subjects for discussion is the man whose book first steered him to the sport 36 years ago. Kessler's study at his home is somewhat of a shrine to Bobby Jones. There are three framed pictures of the man there, as well as a statue. At last count, he has 17 books by Jones and even a set of Bobby Jones playing cards.

It's rare when Kessler will go an entire show without making a reference to his idol. Some of the connections get a little eerie. For instance, when Kessler's wife, Janet, went into labor for the youngest of their three children, Kevin, shortly after midnight on March 17, he became almost giddy.

"You know what this means," Kessler told his wife. "Our son is going to have the same birthday as Bobby Jones."

Janet's response? "I know," she said. "It's my birthday, too."

Like Jones, Kessler is also 5-foot-8 and has been known to flash a temper. Some of Kessler's friends kid him that he's even starting to resemble Jones with his hair and facial features.

One thing they don't share, however, is a classic golf swing. Even though he plays twice a week at Interlachen Country Club, Kessler's handicap has risen to an 8 despite the fact no person has heard more swing tips during his duties on "Golf Academy Live."

"I've listened to 39,800 tips on that show," he says, "and I can think of all of them when I start my downswing. I wonder what muscles move the club away as I'm doing it."

Others wonder if Kessler will ever make a move to one of the major networks. There are times when Kessler admits he's gotten burned out by his heavy on-air schedule at TGC, but doesn't know if he'd ever want to climb a tower and work tournaments a la a Jim Nantz or a Gary McCord.

"I'm curious how I would do at it, but I don't know if I would get enough time or if they would let me do the things I wanted to do," Kessler said. "Believe me, I know I've got it pretty good where I'm at."

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