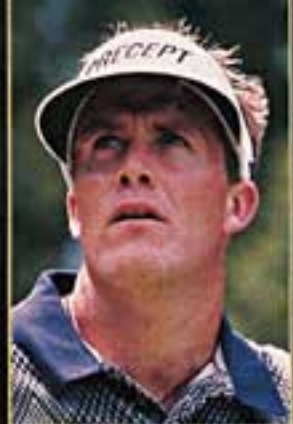


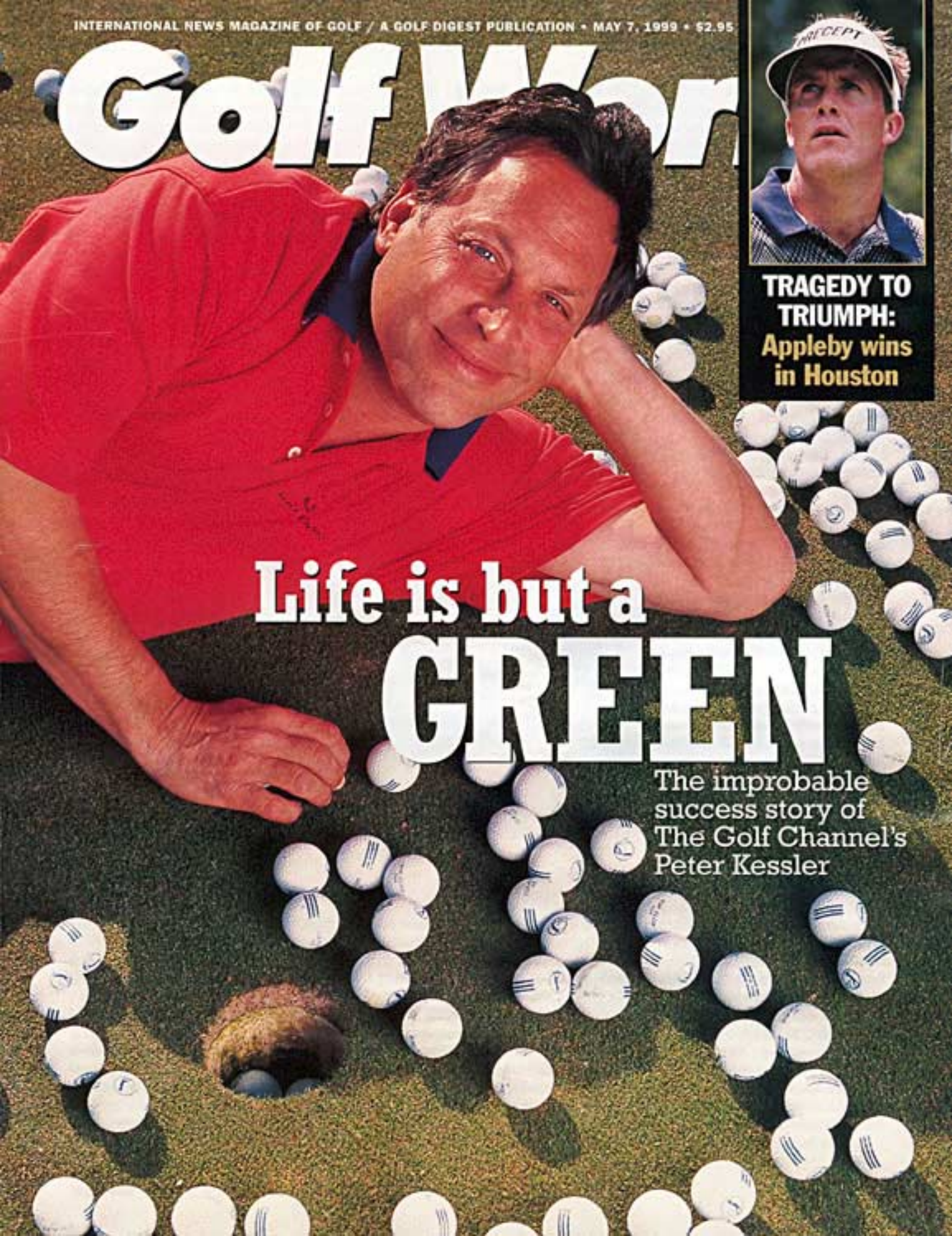
Golf World



**TRAGEDY TO
TRIUMPH:
Appleby wins
in Houston**

Life is but a **GREEN**

The improbable
success story of
The Golf Channel's
Peter Kessler



For those people who not only play golf but immerse themselves in it, the lifestyle includes certain things. One is tuning in regularly—ignoring risks to domestic tranquility and a broader world view—to The Golf Channel. There you will find, without looking very hard, Peter Kessler. You know Kessler. You must. For the love of cable television, he spends as much time in your den as your coffee table.

There he is, discussing the backswing with instructor Butch Harmon. There he is, asking Sam Snead about the old days. There he is, probing PGA Tour commissioner Tim Finchem about Casey Martin's cart. There he is, helping a caller—Tom from North Carolina or Eddie from Ohio—feel better about his slice. "The identity of The Golf Channel is Peter—it really is," says Tommy Roy, an executive producer for NBC Sports. "He's almost like The Golf Channel brand."

Since the network became a destination for junkies a little more than four years ago, Kessler, the primary host of three interactive shows—"Golf Talk Live," "Golf Academy Live" and "Viewer's Forum"—has been its dominant voice. He has hosted about 800 hours of live television since TGC's Jan. 17, 1995, launch, many of which have been replayed to fill a 24-hour schedule. Kessler's ubiquity, at least for those with a cable box, has made him the voice of golf.

It's not a voice you will soon forget. Kessler's baritone starts well below the ground and emerges some time later deep and distinctive, its husky edge owing to the Marlboro Lights he is forever quitting. It is a sound that could sell soap or set up a macabre moment in a horror movie, an authoritative tone that has narrated acclaimed documentaries on the Holocaust, baseball and boxing.

"It's an unbelievable voice," says Lee Siegel, who produces Kessler's shows. "The way Peter's voice is, certain things immediately take on respectability. Yeah, his voice was a gift, but once he got in position to use it, he's certainly made the most of it."

If all Kessler had were his vocal cords, he wouldn't have become the voice of golf. Perhaps he'd be back in New York City, reading aloud advertisements in women's magazines, as he did a decade ago, trying to figure out how to capitalize on his voice and retool his life. But Kessler, who recently turned 47, was a hardcore golfer from his teen-age years growing up in New Jersey, and he accrued an encyclopedic knowledge of the game's history by absorbing the classic golf books.

Kessler learned to play proficiently while living in Califor-

nia when he was in his early 20s. He got down to a 2 handicap and won the club championship at La Costa in 1976. Into his late 30s, however, while building a career as a marketing specialist in New York City, Kessler was unable to make a living off of either golf or his voice. It was, however, time well-spent. "I worked on Wall Street for 15 years giving speeches to brokers," he says. "That prepares you for everything because 48 out of 50 of them aren't paying attention and the other two guys are throwing sandwiches at each other. You learn to deal with distractions and think on your feet. I had done community theater, and I was never shy about standing up in front of a group of people and talking."

Working in voice-over auditions between his Wall Street sales pitches, Kessler found that his distinctive delivery had appeal. He got jobs narrating award-winning documentaries for HBO, including "When It Was A Game," about baseball, and "In This Corner," a boxing trilogy. But Kessler's biggest break was becoming a friend and occasional golf partner of an HBO producer named Michael Whelan. In the fall of 1994, Whelan was hired by The Golf Channel to become its vice

A former Wall Street marketer, Kessler's appetite for research is almost as voracious as his love of the game.



president of production, which meant he would assemble talent for the fledgling network.

"Peter's passion for the game of golf just radiated, but it went beyond that to his knowledge," says Whelan. "I don't think that in 18 years in TV, I met anyone who knew more about their particular sport than Peter did about golf. I thought it would be a wonderful science project."

There was but one problem: Kessler had never been in front of a camera. It wasn't exactly an issue Whelan trumpeted to his superiors during the hiring process, but to reassure himself and other higher-ups that he had his man, Whelan phoned Kessler several times over a three-month period, sometimes at odd hours, to ask him golf trivia questions.



Kessler realized he was on trial but never felt offended or annoyed. "I was totally amused and loving it," he says. "I knew I was going to know the answers, and the more he called, the lower my anxiety got."

Once Kessler was in place, Whelan gave him carte blanche. "He was the guy who said I was born to host television shows, and I believed him," Kessler says. "He just let me go figure out how to do this work." Unencumbered by a rigid hierarchy that would have limited him at a bigger TV operation, Kessler thrived in his new environment and reveled in the fact that, although he was a newcomer, he was the star. "At the beginning I heard 'Where did he pay his dues?' all the time," Kessler says. "I ignored it, because there wasn't anything I could do to pay them except just keep doing the work and be consistent."

Kessler's ascent was impossible for viewers to miss, nor was it lost on his colleagues. In a trade where talent is measured in minutes, he was getting hours of airtime. And when the red light wasn't on, Kessler's demanding style could wear down his staff. "I figure for an hour, we should be able to focus well enough to do our best work," he says. "I'm pretty tough on me. I expect a lot."

Adds Siegel, "It wouldn't be natural if the other talent wasn't jealous. If you're in front of a camera, you have an ego. Peter does three of our most high-profile shows, and other people would like to do them. I think they believe they might do things a little differently, but I think they appreciate that he's real good at what he does."

Even for critics who thought Kessler's smile was too wide, his questions too long and his manner too fawning, it was as if he had been doing TV his entire life. "Stunning," says instructor Jim McLean, an adviser to The Golf Channel. Kessler didn't have trouble getting used to a voice talking into his ear. He could humanize a legendary guest one night, then loosen up a club pro making his first TV appearance the next.

"When you're doing a show with him, he's just so calm and confident, he makes you feel like your going to be fine,"

Despite little experience prior to The Golf Channel, Kessler was, in the eyes of the man who found him, born to host television.

turned the incident into a memory. "That's it—no more golf," he joked, heading into a commercial. "It's become very dangerous." Returning from the break, Kessler mockingly removed the club from Grant's hands, saying, "I'd like to feel safe before we start this segment, if you don't mind." Live TV never looked so polished. "It was a great fun moment," Kessler says. "Exactly the kind of thing you hope happens when you present an hour of entertainment."

Kessler writes his own material, on legal pads. Regardless of what show he's doing, he never uses a TelePrompTer, rarely flubs a delivery, even on "Viewer's Forum," an hour of multiple studio guests, callers and topics. "He was very, very thorough," says Davis Love III, a guest on "Golf Talk Live" in 1998. "You can tell when somebody doesn't know what they're doing. With Peter, he knew what he was going to talk about and he knew what the answers were going to be." As Kessler points out, this is no accident. "I always think of something Jack Nicklaus said," he says. "The difference between being nervous and being afraid is being prepared."

To that end, Kessler would rather prepare at his home in Winter Park, Fla., where he has compiled an extensive golf library, and not at TGC studios, where he has only a small cubicle. A member of Interlachen CC, he now breaks 80 about half the time, but because he accepted checks totalling \$2,600 for playing in two Celebrity Players Tour events last year, Kessler is technically a professional golfer. It is the ultimate irony, considering his deep appreciation for the greatest amateur of all, Bobby Jones.

McLean says. "I know he does that with every person who goes on." Adds Ben Crenshaw: "He's smooth as glass." When singer Amy Grant shanked a shot on a recent edition of "Academy Live"—the ball flew between the legs of her instructor, Mike Wine—Kessler

Kessler's wife, Janet, and the youngest of their three children, Kevin, share Jones' birthday, March 17. "If I ever had an idol, he's certainly it," Kessler says. "A lot of my sensibilities are ones that I learned from reading about Jones and the things he wrote. He could write, he could speak in public, he was an engineer, a lawyer. He was my size."

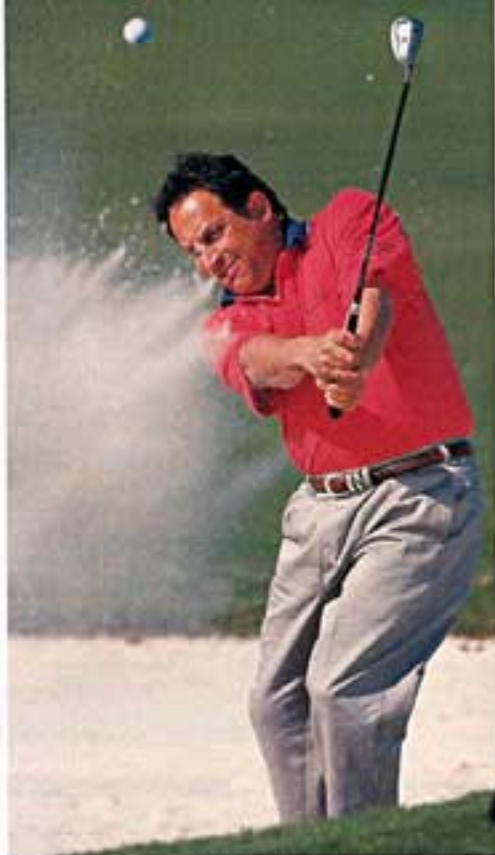
Almost everybody who is anybody has been a guest of Kessler on "Golf Talk Live." And though Kessler will ask the tough questions, as was the case with Mark McCumber (accused of cheating), Finchem (the Martin lawsuit) and Nick Faldo (fired coach David Leadbetter by fax), his style is more gentle than guard-dog. Siegel defends the approach, recalling TGC's place in the food chain when it came on the air. "On 'Golf Talk Live,' the players were doing us a big favor coming on, especially the first two or three years," Siegel says. "It was real important to us that they were comfortable with what we were asking, because we didn't want to upset them and have them not come back on."

Kessler's interest in the game's tradition helps him connect with TGC viewers, many of whom are older and conservative. His interview style may also work because of his on-air manners. He rarely cuts off a guest in mid-sentence, nor is he a relentless interrogator. His peppering of Finchem on the Martin issue was a notable exception, but on that particular occasion, the show was extended 30 minutes—and Finchem got a chance to defend the tour's position at length after the sharp questions were asked.

"I don't think I have a responsibility to raise [the issue of] Nick Faldo leaving his wife," Kessler says. "I do feel a journalistic responsibility to bring up that he wrote Leadbetter to end their relationship instead of calling or showing up. I try to separate what I'm curious about from what I have a responsibility to report on. It isn't often in golf that a thing like the Casey Martin suit comes around to chew on. I think there are very few tough questions in golf."

Kessler's toughest time at The Golf Channel came a year ago this week, and he wasn't prepared for it. That's when TGC took him out of its lineup, citing the need to develop other talent and give their Cal Ripken a rest. "It was Monday, May 4," he says. "The week before, they came to me and said they were going to reduce my airtime a little bit, and they reduced it a ton. When they first took me off, I felt like it was punishment of some kind."

It went deeper than that. Kessler felt betrayed by Whelan, claiming the man who gave him his shot grew weary of his celebrity and "did everything he could" to get rid of him. "Michael made it clear he had a problem that he wasn't getting a lot of press and I was," Kessler says. "I tried to tell him that when someone wrote something about me it was our



A former club champ at La Costa, Kessler is having a blast as The Golf Channel's go-to guy.

wildest dreams did I think he would be as good as he is."

After the hundreds of hours doing talk shows, does Kessler want to expand his horizon? If another dream were to follow the one he's currently living, he says he'd love to be an essayist at the major championships, the way Jack Whitaker used to be. "But I don't know if I want to climb a tower in the heat and fight off flies and try to make a six-shot lead by Joe Durant seem exciting," Kessler says of becoming a tournament announcer. An executive with another network concurs. "I don't really see him calling golf," the executive says, "but he probably could if somebody gave him the chance."

The question may not be what Kessler is getting into, but rather, what he would be giving up. "He's almost like a co-producer," says Siegel. "The experience I have at covering live events, the producers call the shots. They would listen to Peter, but I don't think they would listen to Peter enough. If he wanted it bad enough—if that's what he decided to do—he could do that. But it would be interesting."

One recent Sunday, after another glitchless "Viewer's Forum," Kessler walked off the set and announced, to no one in particular, "Sure beats wearing a wool suit on Wall Street." As he walked off into the balmy Florida evening, Kessler pulled out his shirt tail. He needed a cigarette, but after another hour in your den, he didn't need to say a word. ☾

victory, but he never saw it that way."

Whelan resigned from TGC last August, having blueprinted much of the network's success. He denies trying to fire Kessler, out of jealousy or any other reason. "If that's his version, that's his version," says Whelan. "I don't think it came down to me or Peter Kessler. If it did, I was never told that. Peter wasn't on the air for reasons higher than me. I waved a pretty good wand, but pulling main talent off the air wasn't something I could have done."

Regardless of who reduced his schedule, which has since been reinstated to about 80 percent of the interactive shows, Kessler pouted when he was first told. "I overreacted badly," he says. "I don't deny that. But I didn't start doing this until I was 42 years old and I didn't have a whole lot of interest in taking a whole lot of days off. I didn't feel burned out, but I believe now there was probably some overexposure."

Whelan hasn't spoken to Kessler since he left TGC. Currently out of television, Whelan says he is still proud of Kessler, although former colleagues say the relationship took on the tone of a nasty divorce in its final months. Whelan, claiming no rancor now, says, "I knew Peter would be good, but never in my