

Dillinger Family Tree HAS DEEP GOLF ROOTS

Around the time of the Great Depression, John Dillinger was one of America's most notorious gangsters. It wasn't just that he robbed banks and escaped prison twice. He had the nerve to rob police stations too. That kind of thing will earn you an infamy that lasts. It is why, decades later, Ryan Dillinger used to get quizzed on his lineage at the start of most school years.

"History teachers would sometimes want to know if I was any relation," says Dillinger, assistant superintendent to Tyler Casey at West Bay Golf Club in Estero.

"The name is a bit of a talking point." The teachers' curiosity was on the money. Dillinger is indeed a blood relative – "a fifth or sixth cousin" – of the namesake who was at one time the country's most wanted man, and who inspired the movie *Public Enemies*.

These days, at least in southwest Florida, the Dillinger name is best known in golf. Ryan's brother, Rob III, who played Division One golf at Southeast Missouri State, was a former assistant superintendent at Vanderbilt Country Club and now is a territory sales manager with Holganix. Their father, Robb Dillinger Jr., has worked with Upstart Products, which merged with Ewing Irrigation this summer, and their mother, Lisa, is in the industry, as member services manager at Estero Country Club.

Before the family moved to the Fort Myers area 13 years ago, Robb Jr. was a long-time superintendent for Arnold Palmer Golf in St. Louis, MO and a past-president of the Mississippi Valley Golf Course Superintendents Association. For good measure, Lisa served as the association's executive director for years. Rob III's wife Beth ran a beverage cart at Gateway National in St. Louis, a role that Ryan's wife Shealee used to have at The Plantation Golf and Country Club in Fort Myers.

To cap it all off, Ryan's godfather is Cal Roth, senior vice-president of agronomy for the PGA Tour. Roth and Ryan's dad are friends from their college days.

Robb Jr. grew up on a grain and livestock farm which he says taught him fundamentals of fertility. "But at the time it looked to me like all there was to farming was scooping you-know-what," he says. "My mom told me that, whatever I did, I needed to find



Gangster John Dillinger.



Meet the Dillingers: Ryan, Lisa, Robb Jr. and Rob III.

something that involved work and play at the same time because she said I loved to play."

But there was nothing playful about what was looming on the horizon at the time. Or at least that's how it seemed. Robb Jr. was set to serve in Vietnam when, at the last minute, his orders were rescinded and he was instead posted to Hawaii. There, he worked processing classified material for a two-star general who enjoyed golf. The general would have Robb Jr. arrange tee times but often had to pull out late as issues came up. So, he would send Robb Jr. in his place. The contrast between what he was headed to in Hanoi and where he ended up in Hawaii could not have been greater.

After his tour of duty, Robb Jr. returned to the mainland and went to the University of Southern Illinois where he met Roth and the two became close friends. Rob II remembers Roth, a student and a bartender at the time, landing a job at a "nine-hole course with no money." "Cal gave me and our buddies free golf if we'd come help out during aerification," he says.

Eventually, Robb Jr. moved to Vail, CO where he learned of the



The Dillinger family with the King back when Robb Jr. was working for Arnold Palmer Golf: Lisa and Robb Jr. with Ryan and Rob III in front.

turf program at Front Range Community College and thought he would “give it a shot.” While he was in school, he says, Roth, who by now was making his way in the business, helped him land an assistant superintendent position at Rolling Hills, a course on Coors family property in nearby Golden and a career was under way.

The seeds of that career were sown years earlier. Robb Jr.’s great grandfather helped build a country club in Illinois and an uncle was a golf pro in Chicago. His own father was an avid golfer who eventually lost his sight to a rare disease, retinitis pigmentosa. The father stopped playing for a time but would ride with Robb Jr. when he played and the son would describe holes and the shots he was playing. Eventually, Robb Jr. got his dad to a driving range and started setting him up to take swings.

“He became a good player all over again,” Robb Jr. says. So good in fact that his dad was invited to play in the Ken Venturi Guiding Eyes Golf Classic in New York. A favorite family story is how, in that tournament, he was accidentally struck by a golf ball and quickly joked: “It was the darnedest thing. I just didn’t see it coming.”

Robb Jr. says he never dared dream his own sons would follow him into golf careers. But he concedes they gained a familiarity with the industry from an early age. “They kind of grew up in and around the maintenance facility,” he says. “Riding golf carts and go-karts out the back of the building.”

Ryan recalls being “thrown on a bunker crew” as a kid. He would go on to college on a track and cross-country scholarship but golf eventually won out. “It came naturally to me,” he says. “It makes sense to me a bit.” Before arriving at West Bay 18 months ago, Ryan worked at The Plantation Golf and Country Club in Fort Myers and at nearby Fiddlesticks Golf Club. He is looking at heading back to school online to complete a turf science degree.

The Dillinger family tries to make a point of heading to TPC Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach every May for The Players Championship. It’s a chance to connect and celebrate life in golf as well as spend some time catching up with Roth who oversees agronomic preparations. There might not be a family tree with roots in the game that stretch so deep. Robb Jr. is thrilled the family continues to grow in the game.

“I guess they were golf course kind of kids,” he says of Ryan and Robb Jr. “It’s really quite a treat they decided to go this way. There’s nothing more rewarding than to go to a conference or a meeting and your boys are there too.” ■



Robb Jr., Lisa and Ryan at this year’s Everglades GCSA Poa Classic.




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