

What Drives Rocco Mediate?

A Working Man
Whose Work Happens to Be
Professional Golf

By Alan Champorcher

Sitting in the restaurant in the Lodge at the world-famous Pebble Beach Golf Links, Rocco Mediate and his wife Jessica look at home. Pebble is where America's elite play the game. The waiters are quiet and deferential, red coals glow in the pizza oven, and the sunset over Monterey Bay is stunning. Everyone comes by our table to pay their respects. >



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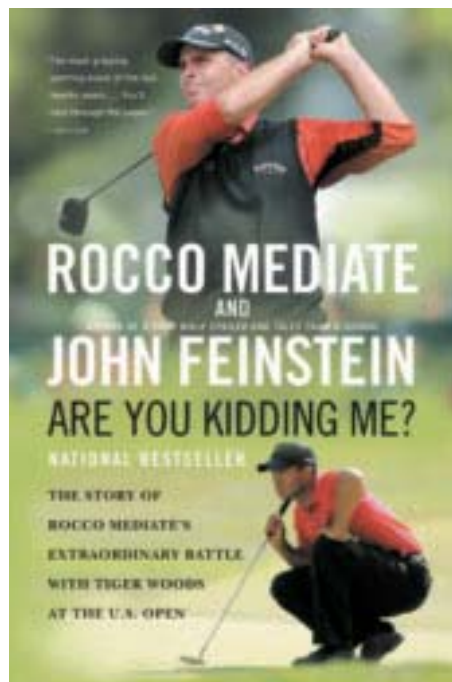
Rocco Mediate at Pebble Beach
Ken Doo Photography—kendoophotography.com

It has been this way since we stopped on the 18th tee to take a few photographs. Stylishly attired men from America's business elite who know Rocco from decades of Pro-Am tournaments stop for a quick word. He is relaxed, wearing his trademark black vest and chewing on a half-smoked Cuban cigar. Rocco is the model of the successful professional golfer, the man who, a few years back, played toe-to-toe with Tiger Woods in one of the greatest U.S. Opens ever. Their battle held a national television audience in thrall.

Yet, not far below this smooth surface is another Rocco—the son of a second-generation Italian American family. A guy who would not be out of place telling stories and cutting hair at his father's salon in Western Pennsylvania. A guy who threw a mock punch at me two minutes after we met, but would probably have given me the shirt off his back if I asked. Worldly sophistication and bravado shielding the soul of a working man. A man whose work just happens to be competitive golf.

Rocco is from a family of Calabresi, raised in a town near Pittsburgh. He doesn't speak Italian, but says "I can understand pretty much every word in the dialect I was brought up in. I wish I'd stayed with it. Someday I'll do the Rosetta Stone thing."

His father and his uncle, a railroad brakeman, still speak Italian at home.



Scorecard from 2008 U.S. Open:
After four days of play, Rocco held a slim one-stroke lead over the world's No. 1 golfer Tiger Woods. Tiger sank a birdie putt on the 72nd hole to force a dramatic one-on-one playoff. After his remarkable performance, Rocco lost on the first hole of sudden death play.

The image is a screenshot of the U.S. Open Championship scoring table from 2008. The table shows the top two players, Rocco Mediate and Tiger Woods, tied at 14 strokes. Rocco Mediate is listed with a score of 14 and a hole-in-one on the 72nd hole. Tiger Woods is listed with a score of 14 and a hole-in-one on the 72nd hole. The table also shows the total score, par, and the number of holes in regulation for each player.

PL	NAME	SCORE	PAR	HOLE-IN-ONE	REGULATION
14	Rocco Mediate	14	72	1	72
14	Tiger Woods	14	72	1	72

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Although he has represented an Italian company, he has never traveled to Italy but is anxious to go. His grandparents, including grandfather Rocco Santo Mediate, after whom he's named, emigrated to the United States early in the last century. "I grew up in a very traditional Italian family," Rocco says, "17,000 relatives." They gathered at Uncle Louie's for Sunday dinners.

Rocco still hates fish, and squirms as he remembers the Calabrian dish of sardella, a mixture of newly hatched sardines and pepperoncini that was served at communal meals. Not much of a cook by his own admission, he does make a "killer" sausage and peppers, according to his wife.

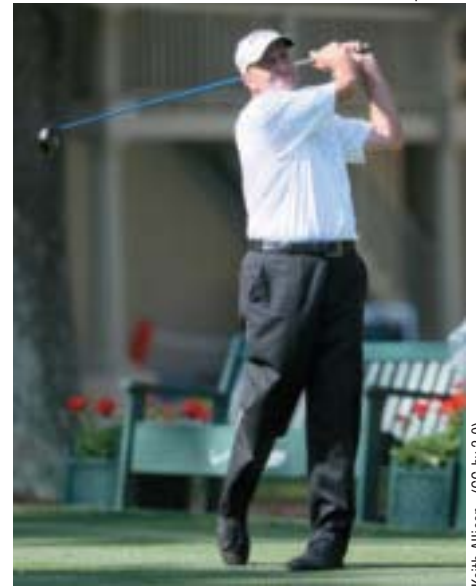
"Forget about it!" Rocco chimes in, "if they served that here, everyone would order it."

His favorite restaurants are old-school Italian, like Toscana and Peppone in Los Angeles. He did not grow up playing golf. His father was an amateur baseball player – good enough for the minors, not quite big enough for the pros. Rocco wanted to follow in his footsteps but threw his arm out at age 16. He turned to golf.

By his own admission, "awful" at first, he improved quickly and made the team at nearby California University of Pennsylvania. As Rocco tells it, "hitting balls on the football field one afternoon, 10 degrees, snowing, I said to my dad I want to go to Florida." He finished his college career at Florida Southern College near Orlando, then, surprising even himself, immediately qualified for the pro tour, getting his card at 21. He's been playing golf for a living ever since.

Not just a living, almost \$20 million in winnings over the past three decades.

Rocco Mediate coauthored a book with bestselling sports writer and author John Feinstein about The legendary face-off with Tiger Woods at the 2008 U.S. Open.



Keith Allison (CC by 2.0)

Verizon Heritage Pro-Am; Hilton Head, S.C., April 14, 2010

Rocco's highest profile moment came in the 2008 U.S. Open at Torrey Pines, when, at 46, he very nearly knocked off the then No. 1 golfer in the world, Tiger Woods. He lost only after Woods made a miraculous putt on the 18th hole to send the match into a playoff. Afterwards, commentators seemed surprised that a "journeyman" pro could do so well against Tiger.

They obviously did not understand what it takes to be a journeyman, either on the regular or Senior Tour—now called the Champions Tour, which Rocco joined when he turned 50. It's not easy to survive decade after decade at the top of the world golf pyramid. Every year, more than a 100 excellent young players vie to take your spot. To be a journeyman, you've had to withstand those annual assaults and finished high enough to be in the money most weeks.

What does it take to do that? Three hundred-yard drives, precise iron shots, or 30-foot putts? Rocco shakes his head. He pats his chest. "No, it's heart," he says. "Can you do it when it counts."

Of course, you also need a swing that will stand up to the strain year after year. Out of commission for two years in the '90s with a disc problem in his lower back, Rocco defied his doctors' predictions and made a comeback after surgery. "They tried to get rid of me, but they couldn't," he laughs. He retooled his swing, taking a wider stance to reduce the torsional pressure on his back, and made his way to the top again.

Standing above the rocky beach for photos, Rocco took a few swings. The difference between a professional golfer and an amateur became immediately clear. Put a driver in his hand, even ➤

Rocco Mediate with wife Jessica at the tee box of Pebble Beach Golf Links' 18th hole alongside the Pacific Ocean



Ken Doo Photography—kendoo photography.com

Links to Italy

Sometime in the winter of 1932, short, sturdy man with a liquid swing stood in a sand trap behind his house in Port Richey, Fla., experimenting with a variety of wedges. Then he took them to a machine shop in town to add or subtract solder on the bottom edges. Finally, he sent the best ones to the Wilson company in Chicago, where they began to manufacture the modern sand wedge, a club that revolutionized the short game for subsequent generations. Eugenio Saraceni—playing under the name Gene Sarazen—had further burnished his reputation as the greatest Italian American golfer, and one of the best golfers of all time.

Winning his first U.S. Open in 1922, this son of a carpenter went on to six more Majors victories and became one of only five golfers in history to conquer the career Grand Slam. Called "the Squire" because he always dressed in smart plus-fours, Sarazen also hit the "shot heard around the world," a 235-yard four-wood for the first-ever "double eagle 2" (three strokes under par, otherwise known as an "albatross," one of the rarest shots in golf) that allowed him to tie, then win, the 1935 Masters.

Like Sarazen, other children of Italian immigrants, many of them who learned the game as caddies at swanky country clubs, went on to become successful professional golfers. Johnny Revolta, Vic Ghezzi, Felice

Torza, Tony Manero, and all seven of the golfing Turnesa brothers from New York, enriched the American golfing scene in the '30s, '40s and '50s. Like Gene Sarazen, Ghezzi, Revolta, Jim Turnesa and, more recently, Mark Calcavecchia, all won major championships.

And who can forget the great golfer and broadcaster Ken Venturi, who learned to play at Harding Park in San Francisco, where his parents ran the pro shop. Venturi won the 1964 U.S. Open in 100-degree

temperatures, collapsing in exhaustion between rounds. When a doctor advised him that playing the final 18 holes could be harmful or even fatal, Venturi responded, "Well, it's better than the way I have been living."

It was not only the men who played splendid golf. In 2001, Donna Caponi was elected to the Golf Hall of Fame. Nicknamed the "Watusi kid" because she enjoyed hitting the dance floor after long days on the links, Caponi won 24 tournaments, including back-to-back U.S. Opens in 1969 and 1970.

Then there are the "secret" Italians, those you wouldn't suspect of having Italian backgrounds from their last names. Two-time major winner and hall of famer Doug Ford was born Douglas Fortunato. Fred Couples' paternal grandparents were Italian immigrants who changed their name from Coppola. And Phil Mickelson's mother Mary is of Italian descent.

In the 21st century, a new generation, with names like DiMarco, Tambellini, Stephani, Marino, Paolini and Tomasulo, carries on the tradition, chasing birdies on the PGA tour. They have a rich legacy to live up to.

—Alan Champorcher



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Clockwise from top left: Gene Sarazen at Miami, Fla., 1921-22; Mark Calcavecchia at the 2008 U.S. Open; Fred Couples in 2008; Phil Mickelson at The Open Championship in 2006 at Hoylake



Rocco Mediate takes a swing at Pebble Beach

when he's wearing sandals and chomping on a stogie, and he's transformed. He is in complete control. That's what makes a successful pro golfer—the ability to focus all his concentration and power onto the back of a tiny white ball, producing a solid sound like nothing you've ever heard at your country club or public golf course. There is no energy left for the arms to flail or for the body to lose its balance.

Rocco points out that golf is one of the only sports where it is possible to be competitive at the highest levels almost throughout one's life. He's now 53. Ask him how long he can play and, to prove how flexible he is, he offers to get up and touch his palms to the ground. "Hale is 69 and he shot 67 last Friday," Rocco says, referring to Hale Irwin, still competitive on the senior tour. "And I'm getting better. I feel like I'm 12.

"It's not the distance that kills anybody," Rocco says, "it's how many putts you make."

Then there is life on the road, averaging 35 weeks a year. Hotel rooms and restaurant meals, who wouldn't get tired? Unlike professional athletes in team sports, a golf pro runs his own business. He is an independent contractor, generally flying commercial and lugging his own baggage. Surprisingly, Rocco was not staying at the swanky Pebble Beach Lodge next to the course. The PGA does not take care of things like that for their golfers. Like most fans, Rocco and his wife had to navigate each evening back to their motel in nearby Carmel. The nomadic life takes a toll. Already Jessica (they were married in January, 2014) says she hopes they'll be able to spend a little less time on the road in the coming year.

Not that other professional sports don't have the same issues, but don't get Rocco started. He thinks baseball and football players are coddled, paid whether they play—or behave—well or not. Athletes who make a luxurious living, yet don't seem to respect their sport or their fans, drive him crazy.

"You have to give something back. I learned that from Arnold," he says. Arnold is Arnold Palmer, of course, who came from Latrobe, Pa., just up the road from Greensburg. Palmer learned how to treat the fans from his father, the greenskeeper at the local country club who also cleaned the members' cleats. You get the feeling that Rocco learned that lesson much earlier, from the older folks in his own family.

Wherever his preoccupation with showing respect came from, he is passionate about it. Pro athletes have a responsibility to be good role models, he says, and too many of them do not live up to it. Rocco's solution: dock their pay if they don't perform, and fire the ones who act irresponsibly to teammates, fans or family. Lots of others would be happy to take their place.

As Rocco relaxes, his public persona recedes and he becomes more reflective. How long will he play this game? As long as the body holds out and he can tolerate the travel. He'd like to spend more time at home with Jessica, more time on the couch having a beer like a regular person.

But it is hard to imagine this tornado passively watching football games. He'd be jumping up and down and yelling at the television. With all that enthusiasm, expect him to be a pro golfer for a long time to come.

He admits he can get a little down after a bad day on the links. But then "an hour later, I'm back on the course." As Rocco sums it up, "We work for what we get. I wouldn't change it for anything." ▲

After a career as a lawyer and executive, Alan Champorcher left the business world to write in Breckenridge, Colo., where he lives with his wife Carolyn and dog Katie. After three novels set in Italy, his next adventure will take the reader to the Old Course at St. Andrews. He hopes that 2015 will be the year he finally breaks par.