



PROJECT NEXT

After a life-threatening bout with cancer, veteran golf analyst Mark Roling beats the odds and is now giving back in every way he knows how.

by ANN MILLER ■ photography by MARCO GARCIA

FOR GOLF'S SAKE, THANK GOD MARK ROLFING DIDN'T HAVE ENOUGH GAME. WHO ELSE COULD HAVE IMAGINED, INSTIGATED AND NURTURED so many high-profile professional golf events in paradise? Who else could have taken his show—and Hawai'i's—on the road as the first TV golf analyst without a major championship to his name? Who else could have brought Tiger Woods and former POTUS—and Punahou alumni—Barack Obama together for a project on Chicago's South Side that the Illinois-born Roling simply calls "the future of sustainable urban golf in America"? And really, who else could envision the heart of Hawai'i golf as a pulsating symbol of the game's future—and possibly Waikiki's—that entertains thousands and employs hundreds along the mauka shore of Ala Wai Canal?

At 68, and two years from a cancer diagnosis, the guy who lives on Kapalua Bay's oceanside fifth hole is not still just thinking out of the box. The box has been blown up and Roling is on a tear powered by 40 years of astonishing accomplishments.

He sees an infinite future, along with wife Debi, who has been an active partner on this entire wild ride and the heartwarming personal stories that have happened out of sight.

"My cancer is the real reason why Chicago and Ala Wai are projects that are gaining such momentum," says Roling, whose Stage 4 salivary gland cancer has been in remission more than a year. "If we had not gone through that, I can almost promise this would not be happening. These are such massive projects. If not for such a life-changer, we wouldn't have taken this on."

How massive? Roling is now president of the non-profit Chicago Parks Golf Alliance. He envisions the \$30 million project to reconfigure two city courses as a place that can change an entire community. It will be "the front yard" of Obama's Presidential Library, with Woods the lead designer.

On the Hawai'i home front, he dreams of Ala Wai Municipal becoming the model for the "sustainability of golf in Hawai'i," to say nothing of the "beginning of the refurbishment of the back side of Waikiki."

"It's not like 30 years ago when you could build a trophy golf course people paid a lot of money for or a real estate development where golf was an amenity, and it made sense to build these great courses," Roling insists. "The future of golf in Hawai'i is based on the growth of the game at the grass-roots level. If we stay stagnant or continue to lose ground, it's not going to be sustainable."

Roling has had a number of discussions with the city about the future of golf here and keeps going back to the game's three basic problems: Too difficult, takes too long and costs too much.

"Until we get serious about addressing those issues, there is no chance for growth, which means the game is not sustainable," he says. "My hope is that we begin at the grass-roots level and zero-in on Ala Wai because we've got to start somewhere so let's start there. Let's have the city and county hit the reset button and say 'here's our plan.'"

Roling envisions all Hawai'i's golf associations under one roof at the course just mauka of Waikiki. He sees an 18-hole course "with a little different character to it" because of renovations necessary for it to hold water "if the 100-year storm comes down the Ala Wai Canal."

There would be a practice facility that combines golf and entertainment—something like Topgolf, now advertising 500 employment opportunities in Charlotte, N.C., its 33rd and latest site. The 17-year-old company is known for double- and triple-decker ranges where guests—about half have never golfed before—hit micro-chipped golf balls at targets.

Roling's new golf world would be a base for junior golfers and college teams and players of every age and skill level by day.

Serious fun could take over at night.

And those 100,000 tourists across the canal would have one more great option for entertainment.

"MARK IS UNIVERSALLY RESPECTED IN THE WORLD OF GOLF." — THOS ROHR, PRESIDENT OF KAPALUA LAND CO.



FROM TOP: Rolfing reports live from the LPGA LOTTE Championship as NBC's Golf Channel analyst; Rolfing greets professional golfer Michelle Wie with a hug (photos by Marco Garcia).

OPPOSITE PAGE: Rolfing with his wife Debi and their "angel babies" (photo courtesy Mark and Debi Rolfing).

Ideally, such a massive concession would help fund all six municipal courses, and some of that expansion.

"Golf can be an amazing hub for activity, and I truly believe Ala Wai should always be a golf course, but it is a huge footprint of land for a public golf facility," Rolfing says. "There is ample space not utilized right now. My thought is, with a little reconfiguring, you could help solve flooding problems and at the same time, create spaces for other activities.

"At this point I'm a cheerleader, instigator, dot connector," he says. "Am I going to be the guy who figures it out? Maybe not. Can I be a factor in finding the right people to figure it out and get it together? The answer is yes."

Chicago thought the same thing, along with Obama who, like Rolfing, sees the South Shore development as a grass-roots initiative that can have a huge impact on the community. The Obamas' wedding reception was at the South Shore Cultural Center on the current site and his Presidential Library will be there in the future.

"Obama called Tiger," Rolfing recalls, "and in effect said, 'I'd like you to get involved.' Within 10 or 11 days Tiger had arranged to come spend the day with me up there, looking at the site and trying to understand what's going on, on a beautiful summer day in August."

Woods' first reaction to the site was "Where are all the kids?" He kept asking Rolfing the same question while they looked it over.

Their vision is to transform Jackson Park—built in 1899—and South Shore—a country club until 1974—into an 18-hole championship golf course with a family-oriented short course and a practice facility. The plan is to have at least 80 percent of the renovation cost funded by donations, a model Rolfing calls unique in the game.

The project, like Ala Wai, is close to his heart for infinite reasons, not the least being his cancer diagnosis. He remembers the day he got it, two hours before a meeting with the Chicago Park District.

"The doctor said what you have is extremely serious," Rolfing recalls. "The tumor has got to come out immediately. There is small chance of recovering. I remember talking to Debi and making the decision not to cancel the meeting and not to tell them what occurred two hours before.

"We went in there thinking we have a chance to make a difference. I'm going to beat this cancer and I'm going to really re-think why I do things, have more of a sense of urgency and conviction. I can do it if I have more of a sense of hope. In a matter of a couple hours, my whole outlook on the diagnosis changed. "It was my best day and my worst day. Without a doubt, they were the same day."

The Rolfings also consider the day they landed in Hawai'i one of their best. After many mostly forgettable golf tournaments



on four continents, and two disappointing PGA Tour Q-school appearances, Mark and Debi arrived on Maui in late 1975.

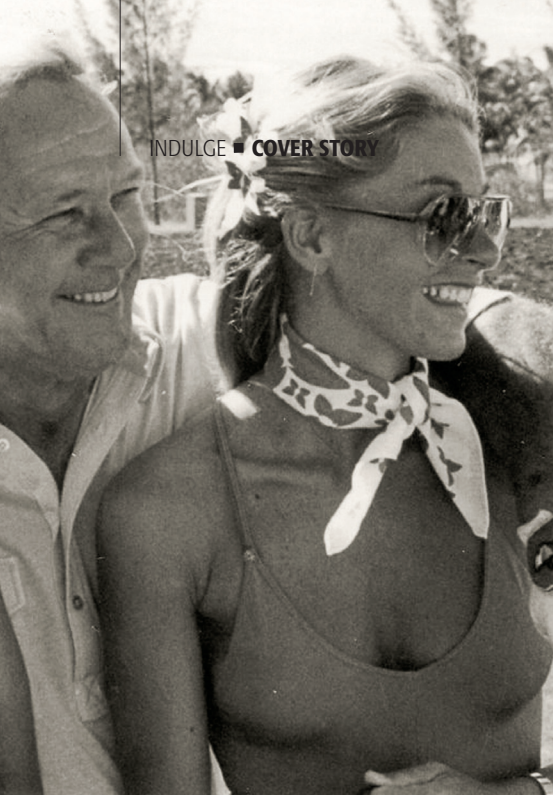
Debi worked her way into a successful real estate career and Mark—former Vice President Dan Quayle's golf teammate and

roommate at DePauw University—rose to head pro at Kapalua. His gift for golf and being good company made him the resort's point man for VIP visitors like Pres. Gerald Ford and Jackie Stewart.

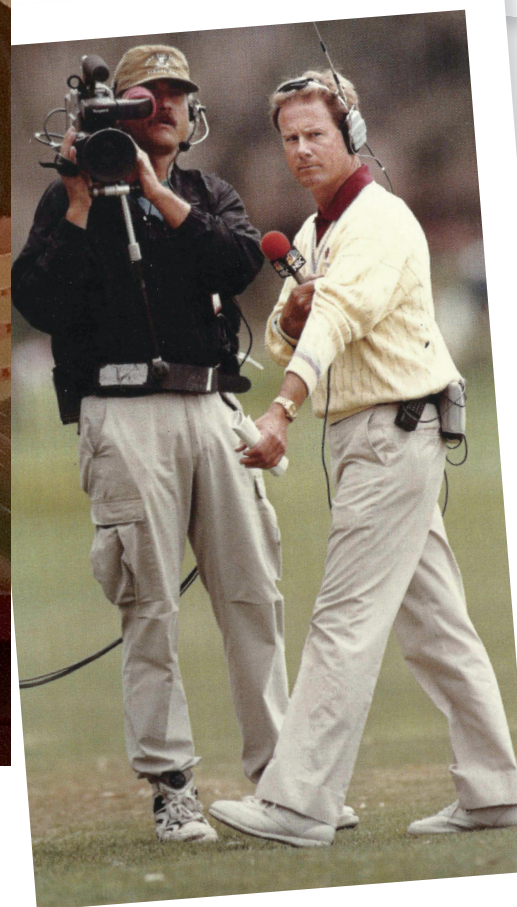
Soon after, Rolfing told Thos

Rohr, President of Kapalua Land Co., he was planning to take a job as head pro at Pebble Beach.

"I said to Mark, 'Are you sure you just want to be a head golf professional? I think you can do way more,'" Rohr recalls. "He



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP: Debi Roling with Arnold Palmer circa 1978; The Governor's Dinner in honor of Mark Roling Day Proclamation on Feb. 23, 2016; The Rolings founded The Mark and Debi Roling Charitable Foundation, providing "cradle care" for newborns. Debi is pictured here with baby Samuel Marcus (photos courtesy Mark and Debi Roling).



FROM TOP: Mark (right) and Arnold Palmer (left) in Kapalua; Mark's early NBC announcing career; Mark interviewing Tiger Woods for NBC (photos courtesy Mark Roling).



said, 'Perhaps, but golf is my life and I want to stay in golf. I asked him what businessman he knew played the most golf. And he admitted it was me as head of Kapalua.'

Rohr talked him into becoming Kapalua's first Director of Marketing. It was 1979. He has been in awe since.

"Mark Roling has done more than anyone for the State of Hawai'i over the years," Rohr says. "Using his public persona, Mark has very effectively assisted the state in staying at the forefront of professional

and amateur golf. He has done it all—development, ownership, announcing, golfer friendship, tournaments. Mark is universally respected in the world of golf."

Fellow broadcaster and professional golfer Peter Jacobsen has become a close friend since he was invited to the Arnold Palmer Golf Party in 1977. Palmer was retained to design Kapalua's Village Course.

"I had a great time and met a young Mark Roling who was making it all happen at Kapalua that day," Jacobsen recalls. "I

think he has been the driving force behind attracting the eyes of the world to the magic and wonder of Hawai'i. Not just to the many tremendous golf courses and resorts in Hawai'i, but also to the culture, the food, the music and the lifestyle of Hawai'i."

He was right. The Rolings had fallen in love with Hawai'i by then. Nothing would ever be the same, for them or Hawai'i golf.

Mark developed a relationship with Palmer and created the Kapalua Open off-season event in 1982. Its total purse was

\$110,000 and David Ishii won out over an impressive field. The next year Greg Norman got his first victory in the U.S. at what was now known as the Kapalua International. First place alone was worth \$100,000.

By the end of its 16-year run, the Lincoln-Mercury Kapalua International was affiliated with the PGA Tour. All four rounds were on live prime time cable and network television, it had moved to the new Plantation Course and was owned by (Mark and Debi) Roling Productions.

By then, their company also staged a Senior PGA Tour stop at Ka'anapali, the Maui Classic college basketball tournament, tennis and windsurfing events. Mark was a fulltime broadcaster on network TV, a career sparked by an invitation to come into the booth after he won a car at the 17th Hole Par 3 at his own event in 1985.

"I had never thought about it before," Roling said of TV. "I didn't plan for it, had no idea I could communicate. There was no Gary McCord or David Feherty back then. If you hadn't won a major championship, you had no chance. My Hawai'i Assistant Professional Championship victory was not quite going to get me there.

"What got me there was my ability to communicate and connect, not based on my playing record but people believing me and looking at me as somebody they trusted in terms of the message I was delivering to them. I was a huge upset."

By 1999, Kapalua had become home to the PGA Tour's Tournament of Champions and Mark was the face of Hawai'i golf and its professional golf season, broadcast all over the world to an audience that couldn't get enough of our balmy "winter" weather.



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Menu changes nightly

Mark Roling and Tiger Woods are in talks to partner and renovate Chicago's South Shore Cultural Center into an 18-hole championship golf course with a practice facility (photo courtesy Mark Roling).

Debi was serving as Vice President of Roling Sports, Inc. and still working in real estate. One of her best investments came in 1985 when she and Mark became part of a partnership that purchased the Kapalua Bay Hotel.

A few years after, as the Rolings were finishing the development of the Plantation Course, Debi became deeply involved in "Angel Babies." The Rolings provided "cradle care" in their Kapalua home, for newborns, some medically and critically fragile. In 1999, their first angel baby arrived and was in Debi's care for three weeks. She said then "It is what fills my heart."

Now the couple has nurtured 28 angel babies, keeping them safe and loved until they can return to their birth parents or be adopted with a "forever" family. They also have three hanai children—Michelle, Matthew and Bj.

"I feel this was a divine appointment," Debi says. "God was making my purpose for life abundantly clear to my heart. Nothing I had accomplished in my business life even came close to the fulfillment I was blessed with having a newborn laying on my heart."

Mark says Debi "has always been a caring for the keiki kind of person." Beyond Angel Babies, she has served as Trustee and Director of the Mark and Debi Roling Charitable Foundation for more than 25 years, with all funds directed to children's charities.

That cannot compare to what their children have brought to the Rolings' lives.

"Recently, our hanai children have helped us through the challenges of Mark's cancer journey," Debi says. "We are all traveling this path together. They lift us up and give true purpose to our lives. I would say that is how we have changed. Now our lives are about family."

And golf, and fighting cancer, and Hawai'i. "Mark and Debi are as fine a team as I have ever seen, in anything," Rohr says. "Mark would be the first to tell you, he couldn't have done all he's done without the capable support of Debi."

"They complement each other's skills perfectly. And they are both so attractive and personable. And never underestimate their fertile imaginations and drive. Everywhere they go, they are thinking of how to be helpful."

Clearly, that is what makes them happy. ■

FATHER'S DAY CELEBRATIONS Sunday, June 18

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11:45 a.m.-3 p.m.
\$85 adults, \$42.50 keiki ages 6-12
+ tax and gratuity

Dinner at Plumeria Beach House
5:30-10 p.m.
\$85 adults \$42.50 keiki ages 6-12
+ tax and gratuity

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Brunch at Hoku's
9 a.m.-3 p.m.
\$95 adults, \$47.50 keiki ages 6-12
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