

Golf Digest®

EDITOR'S LETTER

A Golfer Never Forgets

BY JERRY TARDE

PHOTO BY THOMAS BROENING

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We started a series this year that has been drawing strong reader response, called "Golf Saved My Life," written with Associate Editor Max Adler.

"There's something about the nature of golfers," Max says. "You're conditioned to take bad breaks as they come and look forward to the next shot. I hate for that to sound like a cliché, but it's true. As bad as things can get, golf instills that kind of resilience. You see things are about to turn around; good luck is on the horizon."

I thought about this when I read Jaime Diaz's profile of Seve Ballesteros battling brain cancer. I ran into an old golf buddy at the Swallows tournament in California this spring, and he told me another one of those stories.

Tom Siebel founded Siebel Systems, and after doing well is now doing good. The 14-handicapper is ranked by Barron's among the top-five philanthropists in the world, with a special interest in ecology. Last summer he took a trip to Africa.

After a few days of exploring the Serengeti in

Tanzania, Siebel, now 57, left his family at the camp and asked to take a walking safari with his "quite experienced" guide, who would be carrying a double-barreled, .470-caliber rifle loaded with two shells "the size of a roll of dimes." If a wild animal charges, the guide explained, there's one rule to follow: Stand your ground. Run, and you're dead. Stand still, the guide said, and a lion or rhinoceros will likely leave you unharmed.

"It was a beautiful morning, and within a few hundred yards of camp we came upon some Cape buffalo, which we skirted around," Siebel recalls. "About 10 minutes later we saw a herd of about 15 elephants 170 to 200 yards away. We stood and watched them as they grazed, pulling branches off trees, for about seven minutes - quite amazing. It was very placid and quiet. Then I don't know what happened. Perhaps the wind shifted behind us. One of the large adult females just spun around and bellowed; her ears went out to full length, her trunk stuck into the air and she screamed, then made a beeline at us.

"This elephant comes charging at 30 miles per hour. I'm told they're the only mammals with four knees - and very agile. They can cover ground pretty quickly. The guide is about 10 feet in front of me, with his rifle in



Tom Siebel was knocked to the ground by an elephant that proceeded "to dismantle me."

hand, and the elephant approaching at full speed.

"It gets to 50 yards, and the guide doesn't shoot. Forty yards, and the guide doesn't shoot. Thirty yards, 20 yards, 10 yards, five yards, and the guide doesn't shoot. I was doing my job, standing my ground, but the guide wasn't doing his! This animal is like a building coming at us. Finally, the guide shoots - and misses. So the elephant tosses the guide aside and proceeds right up to where I was standing.

"It stops 2½ feet from me for three seconds. One thousand one. One thousand two. One thousand three. It's an image I'll never forget. Five or six tons standing there. I can smell it. I can see the hair follicles, the eye, the tusk, the trunk right in front of me. I don't know what I was thinking. Most certainly I was terrified. After three seconds, the elephant knocks me to the ground and basically starts to dismantle me. Rolling me, stepping on me, kicking me, putting a tusk through my left thigh and pulling it out sideways, stomping me into the dust.

"It's hard to describe how unimaginably painful the blows were. I was kind of curled up, trying to protect my head. I remember every moment of this experience. It was like being attacked by a Caterpillar tractor. I had one thought going through my mind: Please, God, make it stop because I can't tolerate the pain. And then, after about 15 seconds, I looked up, and I was lying there in the Serengeti, and the elephant was gone.

"I could still see the guide curled up in a ball holding the rifle, and I shouted at him to reload in case there were other animals around. I was immobilized, not sure of the extent of the damages, but I had broken ribs, a torn shoulder, both my legs were exposed and very bloody; I'd taken a tusk in one thigh, my right tibia was shattered, and my right foot was dangling by a flap of skin and a couple of tendons. I had to lie there for about 3½ hours while they got help from Nairobi in Kenya; the camp brought in a half-dozen vehicles and surrounded us to keep other animals away. Finally they put me in the back of a pickup truck and then onto a tail-dragger, single-engine Cessna and flew an hour and a half to Nairobi, where they performed surgery. That was almost more terrifying than being attacked by an elephant. Quite honestly it's not the level of hospital care we're used to in the Western world; there are cats on the floor.

"Then I was transported by air ambulance to San Jose - a 20-hour flight with only 10 hours of morphine. By the time I got back, I'd lost two-thirds of the blood in my body, but the good news is, I did not get a transfusion in Africa, which I'm told is a risk-fraught exercise. When I was moved to Stanford Hospital, they spun up their unbelievable diagnostic machine, and over the next six months they performed another 11 surgeries, fixed my ribs and shoulder and saved my left leg and are now in the process of saving my right leg. So after some period of time, I will play golf again. It's unlikely, however, that I will visit Africa again. But I'm extraordinarily grateful for all the people who came to my aid, from Kenya to Stanford."

Siebel says he misses golf. His return took a little step backward this spring when he went out with another golf buddy and hit a pitching wedge and some 6-irons, and before long was cracking drivers, which turned out to be a bad move because he damaged his Achilles tendon. But now he's putting and chipping and vows to be playing by the end of the year.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jerry Tarde". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J" and "T".

Jerry Tarde, Chairman and Editor-in-Chief