

Loneliness in pro golf can be crippling – but Chris Kirk, rental house crew stave it off

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Kirk, Harman, Straka and Todd share house for mental well-being, to overcome loneliness

It's an old canard of pro golf that 95 percent of the field doesn't care what you shot, and the rest wish you'd played worse. The most unsparing assessment, though, comes later, from the four walls of your hotel room. Look at them long enough and they begin to talk, mocking and digging until you can take it no longer and begin to crack.

But not always.

At the recent AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am, Chris Kirk, Brian Harman and Sepp Straka occupied a \$2 million, three-bedroom, three-bath rental house, but it was less about the house than the company, and the battle against one of the meanest job hazards on the PGA TOUR: loneliness.

The issue of social isolation, which the U.S. Surgeon General has called a public health crisis, has exacerbated the opioid epidemic – bubbling up amid the demographic trend toward living alone – and is foundational in the relatively new conversation about mental health among professional athletes. Michael Phelps, the 23-time Olympic gold medalist swimmer, has been open about his mental health struggles, as has former No. 1 tennis player Naomi Osaka.

Victor Dubuisson, who went 2-0-1 for Europe at the 2014 Ryder Cup, cited loneliness as the reason for his retirement at the end of last year. Kirk, who in 2019 stepped away from golf to treat alcohol abuse and depression, said upon receiving the PGA TOUR Courage Award in November that he wasn't going to return if it meant being lonely again.

"I had all those bad memories of sitting by myself in a hotel room," he said. "I just said I'm not willing to do that anymore. If that's what I have to do to come back to the TOUR, then I'm not going to do it."



Kirk, Harman, Straka and Todd share house for mental well-being, to overcome loneliness

Enter the rental houses, which Kirk says have greatly improved his quality of life (his housemates sing the same refrain) and provided peace of mind to those closest to him, too. He scours Airbnb and Vrbo to make the arrangements and then fills the houses from a pool of fellow TOUR pros, mostly fellow Georgia Bulldogs, who claim spots on an ongoing text thread. Denny McCarthy, Greyson Sigg, Brendon Todd, J.T. Poston, Keith Mitchell and a handful of others have been known to nab rooms, depending on the week.

The houses are about having road back-up in what can be a very isolating profession. Mention this job hazard to a PGA TOUR player and you get an instant nod of recognition.

“That’s been the hardest part,” said Grayson Murray, whose victory at the Sony Open in Hawaii in January was his second PGA TOUR win and first since 2017. “Through the tough years, I wanted to give up for that exact reason.”

Athletes in some sports have their teammates and coaches, a merry band of road warriors whose togetherness provides strength and sustenance. Golf isn’t like that.

Said Joel Dahmen: “As you climb the ladder from the minitours to PGA TOUR Canada to the Korn Ferry Tour, it gets lonelier and lonelier because there’s more money and everyone is in different hotels and houses, and you just see each other at the golf course.”

Kirk and Murray, who each suffered from alcohol abuse and depression but won in back-to-back weeks in January, are among those who know firsthand this is a recipe for disaster. Social media, which as Matt Every once famously said isn’t very social, has not helped.

“To be alone and surviving is not the same as being alive,” novelist Lauren Groff wrote of her protagonist in “The Vaster Wilds,” a sentiment that also informed Robert D. Putnam’s 2000 best-seller “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.”

Translation: A life of intense competition, hotel rooms and room service is no life at all.

Family where you find it

And, so, the solution: being around people who actually care what happens to you.

In Carmel, Kirk and friends played Pepper Pong, a paddle game that packs into a travel case and can be set up on a dining room table, replacing their old go-to, Yahtzee. On the kitchen counter sat an open bag of shelled walnuts, and in the fridge were Diet Cokes (Straka), Red Bull and Spindrift (Kirk), plus yogurt and fruit for Kirk as he tries to avoid ice cream and peanut M&Ms.

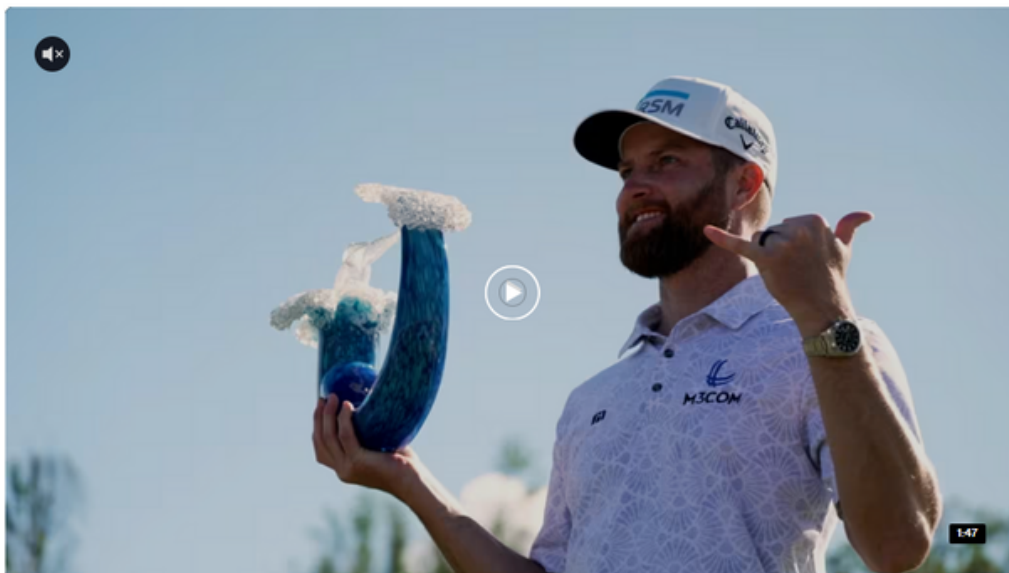
On TV, the Georgia men's basketball team was beating Alabama but falling apart in the second half. (Kirk attends games when he's home in Athens.) Harman got up to take a "rally shower" that didn't work. A storm raged outside, but all was well here.

"It's been nice to kind of go back and have a couple of your best friends there to just spend time with because it does get a little lonely on the road," Straka said.

Straka is a twin and used to having someone to knock around with, which may partly explain why he is Kirk's most constant wingman in these houses. He's also a new father, to a little boy, Leo. Kirk, who has three children, has offered a few tips, although parenting technique is less a subject of conversation here than Georgia sports and the Atlanta Braves. What they rarely talk about is golf.

Collectively, these players are an object lesson in how to fight back against the solitary and punishing nature of their profession. What is somewhat surprising, but perhaps shouldn't be, is that they have enjoyed not just improved mental health but also better golf.

This week Kirk is the defending champion at the Cognizant Classic in The Palm Beaches, where his 2023 victory broke an eight-year win drought. He opened this season by winning The Sentry at Kapalua, Maui. Harman won his first major at The Open Championship last summer, and the Austrian Straka finished 14th in the FedExCup and made his first Ryder Cup team, for Europe.



Chris Kirk wins The Sentry 2024



Poston and McCarthy also have reported an uptick in play.

“It can be a battle, especially when things aren’t going great on the golf course,” said McCarthy, who has finished in the top 40 in the FedExCup the last two years, the best of his career. “It’s nice to have guys in the house to come back to and talk with and hang out. Whether you shoot 65 or 75, it doesn’t matter. My mind has been at ease, and this has factored into that for sure.”

It hardly seems coincidental that the last two winners of the Cognizant (Kirk last year, Straka in ’22) and the John Deere Classic (Straka in ’23, Poston in ’22) have come from the group’s rental houses. In the case of the John Deere, it was literally the same house.

“The tradition is when somebody wins that week then they pay for the entire house,” Kirk said, “and we’ve had, gosh, probably six of those or something like that in the last – a lot of wins the last few years. So, yeah, I think the results just right there kind of speak for themselves.”

Can strength in numbers correlate to better athletic performance?

Bhrett McCabe, a clinical and sports psychologist who works with Billy Horschel, Sam Burns and others on the PGA TOUR, thinks it can.

“We as humans are social creatures,” McCabe said. “We feed off the energy of those around us and one of the hardest and most important things as a touring professional is to figure out who your social circle is. It could be your family, or a group of players you connect with that give you the boundaries and also the support to manage the stresses of being a PGA TOUR player.

“It’s like that in every walk of life,” he continued. “Think of the water cooler at work. It’s the most important thing to figure out for a TOUR player because it can be punishing emotionally out here. It’s important to have the awareness to say: These are the people who make me better.”

A better person, better golfer, better emotionally – often it’s all of the above.

“I’ve had two great years since we started,” Poston said. “The one that sticks out to me is the John Deere, the last couple years. We get a big house, there’s like six of us in there, and it’s fun because you come back and you’re playing cards or throwing football in the backyard. It’s a good way to decompress and get away from golf because the hard part of the hotel thing is you get back to the hotel and, if you’re alone, you’re probably thinking about golf.

“Whatever’s coming the next day, whatever you did today,” he continued. “We’re always thinking about how we can improve, and it’s easy to get overwhelmed by that.”

The way forward

Like Jason Day, Tony Finau and others, Dahmen sometimes travels with his family, wife Lona and their 1-year-old son, Riggs. But not always, and that's when he leans on his road backup.

"I also have my crew," he said. "Ryan Brehm is a close friend, and his wife, Chelsey; Mark and Meg Hubbard; Keith Mitchell and J.T. Poston. It's a nice mix of people, and we kind of have our spots at certain events. You have to kind of find your own family out here and stick with them because it is very easy to go down the hole, especially if you're not playing good golf and you're by yourself in the room and drinking or doing something else you're not supposed to do."

Murray, 30, was a child prodigy, winning IMG Junior World titles in 2006, '07 and '08. At 16 he became the second youngest to make the cut on the Korn Ferry Tour, and at 19 he played in the 2013 U.S. Open at Merion. He began to gravitate toward alcohol, though, when things got hard.

He rallied in part through reconnecting to the lessons he learned during an inpatient stay at Hazelden Betty Ford in Minnesota some two years ago, recommitting to his faith and sticking close to his fiancée, Christiana Ritchie (who also doesn't drink) and their friends.

As Dahmen points out, it's up to the player to find/make his own family, just as it's up to us all. The stakes couldn't be any higher. When Murray plowed his rented scooter into oncoming traffic at the Bermuda Championship in the fall of 2022, he took 50 stitches, half of them to his face.

"I should have died," Murray said, and probably would have, he added, without his helmet.

Winning again has been nice, but more importantly, he's found a way to live.



Grayson Murray wins Sony Open in Hawaii



“My life is so good right now,” he said at the Sony. “I wouldn't trade anything. I have a beautiful fiancée. I have beautiful parents. I have beautiful nephews, siblings. Everyone in my life right now who is close to me who has been through the struggles with me, it's all a team effort.”

In Carmel, the Georgia basketball game on TV had ended and the Pepper Pong had wound down. Kirk, Harman and Straka got ready to go out to dinner, Mexican food. Their wives, having sat this one out, were thousands of miles away, tending to the business of parenting. Kirk joked that they likely think of the players themselves as children, but, turning more serious, wondered if his wife, Tahnee, might be jealous of their set-up. He knows she sees the value in his rental houses; he's a better husband and father at home having found peace on the road. More present.

The Kirk house at the Cognizant Classic in The Palm Beaches this week will include Kirk, of course, plus Brendon Todd and Ben Martin. But Kirk, a six-time PGA TOUR winner and the man they call the quarterback of these arrangements, says the door is open for more.

“You know, people will kind of ask,” he said, “just sort of hear how much fun we have – I get a lot of, ‘Hey, keep in mind if you've got an extra room in the house.’ I try to accommodate the best I can and include kind of whoever wants to be a part of it.

“Unless you're just antisocial,” he added, “this is a lot more fun way to live.”