

A FINE BROMANCE

THE AUSSIE-KIWI RELATIONSHIP CAN BE FRACTIOUS AT TIMES, BUT THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN TOUR PLAYER CAM SMITH AND CADDIE SAM PINFOLD RUNS AS TRUE AS AN AUGUSTA GREEN.

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Mark Wilson - Golfplus Media



Australians love to rub it in around Olympics and Commonwealth Games time when they've generally scooped the lion's share of the spoils by comparison with their Kiwi cousins. They're inclined to claim Crowded House and Russell Crowe, among others, as 'Australian' – and the origin of the pavlova can be another point of dispute among those inclined to dispute such things.

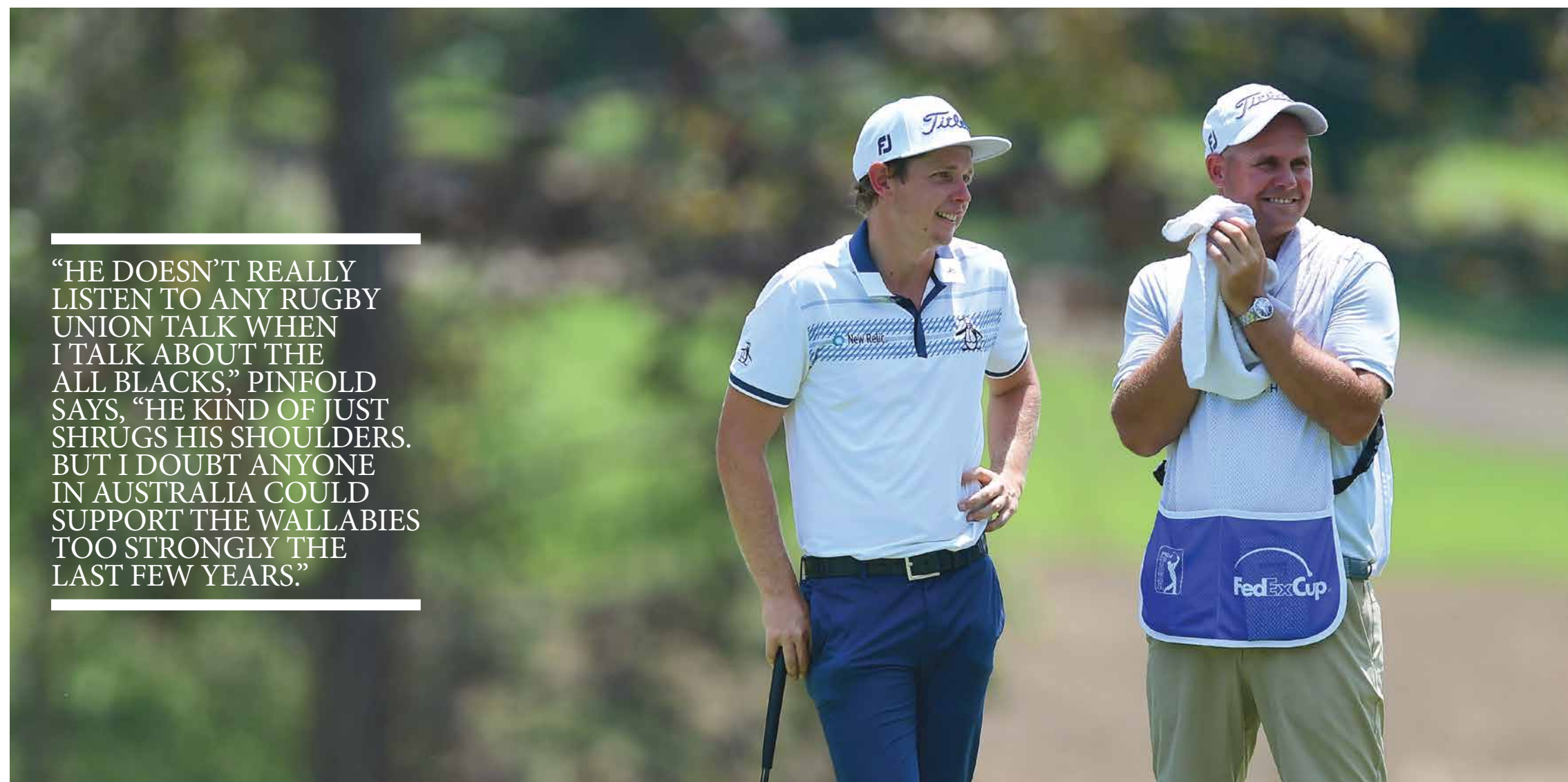
Aussies tend to go a bit quiet, though, when the cry goes up from North and South islands about the Bledisloe Cup and its absence from Australian shores since 2002; quieter still if anyone starts up a chat about one-day cricket history.

Still, the parry-and-thrust between the two neighbours is mainly good-natured (when not steeped in a competitive intensity to beat each other's brains out whenever possible).

As a lifelong Brisbane Broncos and rugby league enthusiast, Australian golfer Cameron Smith could probably care less about the state of his nation's empty trophy cabinet when it comes to the Bledisloe Cup. But you can be sure his skin still bristles when his Tauranga-born bagman, Sam Pinfold, happens to drop it into conversation at just the right moment – if there is such a thing from an Australian's perspective.

"He doesn't really listen to any rugby union talk when I talk about the All Blacks," Pinfold says, "he kind of just shrugs his shoulders. But I doubt anyone in Australia could support the Wallabies too strongly the last few years."

Those sort of jibes are par for the course when you're from our part of the world, but it matters little when it comes to the winning combination Smith and Pinfold have forged



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on and off the golf course over the past five years – a combination that has produced victories on the PGA Tour, in back-to-back Australian PGAs and team representation at World and Presidents Cup levels.

Kiwis will claim it as a match quite literally made in heaven, since the pair first crossed paths on Pinfold's home soil at the 2014 New Zealand Open. Smith, then just 20 and a newly minted pro still a year away from really making a mark on the world stage, had scraped through to the weekend after playing the first 36 holes with a local caddie.

Pinfold had looped for another Aussie, Michael Sim. And when Sim missed the cut, a plea came from Smith's

agent, Ian Davis, to caddie for his young client over the weekend. It was the beginning of a relationship that continues to grow from strength to strength.

Already a semi-veteran of what is now the Korn Ferry Tour, looping for a number of players, including former Masters champion Trevor Immelman, Pinfold made an early impression on Smith, which sparked a profitable move up the leader board over the weekend.

"I'd never used a professional caddie before in my life and on Saturday, we hit all 18 greens in regulation," Smith recalls, "He kind of opened my eyes and mind up to a few things; just having someone else who knew what he was doing chatting in my ear was never a bad thing."

The pair then went their separate ways, Smith going on to parlay some solid Asian Tour finishes into a handful of starts on the PGA Tour in 2015. While in the States, he entered the US Open, qualifying for a place in his first major championship at Chambers Bay, where he turned in one of the best Cinderella performances of recent years, finishing in an astonishing tie for 4th, to consolidate a position on tour and earn him, among other things, his first start at the Masters.

With an immediate playing future in the States secured and before the dust had settled on Chambers Bay, the call went out to Pinfold to join Team Smith. With Immelman's backing, Pinfold didn't need to think twice. He jumped at

the offer, making his debut on Smith's bag a few months later as his player put in another impressive showing (tied 25th) at the PGA Championship.

Their first full season, however, proved to be an up-and-down affair. Smith was still based in Australia, flying back and forth to the US and slowly but surely discovering what life on tour was all about. Chequered results had them contesting the Finals Series of the Web.com Tour at the end of 2016 in an effort to regain status for the following year.

Pinfold cites this experience as one of many examples of Smith's inner drive and dogged determination to succeed.

"He really knuckled down and put in a great performance in Columbus," Pinfold recalls. "The longer the week went on, the better he struck it. He asked me on the 10th tee in the final round how many birdies we needed coming in and I told him three. He made the three but we also made one bogey, which put him just out of a playoff.

"It just showed me pretty early on there that he was a pretty strong player. When he gets in the hunt like that, his game seems to elevate and his ball striking goes up 10 to 20 per cent. His mind just clicks in.

"It's pretty impressive to see when he gets in the hunt, as he doesn't shy away from anything. The confidence grows, the aggression grows. These are the attributes of a real winner...

"He's one of those guys where, if his back is up against the wall and you tell him he can't do something, he takes it as a real challenge and has that 'I'll show you' look in his eye. I've seen that look in him many, many times."

The success they've shared has been on the back of a relationship built on mutual respect for each other's skills. But there's also a synergy that comes from being from a certain part of the world and sharing similar interests. Off-course, the pair share a similar love for cars and rugby league – Smith a Broncos man and Pinfold an avid Warriors fan.

While Smith has hunkered down in Ponte Vedra Beach near Jacksonville, Pinfold prefers to commute back and forth to New Zealand as often as their schedule and current travel and quarantine restrictions allow. Unlike many player-caddie relationships, however, when they're both in the US they tend to spend time with each other away from the golf course.

The day before we spoke for this article, they had shared a day on a boat off the Florida coast, where a line was thrown in and a few beers enjoyed during an off week. They were also planning to set the alarm for 3.30am to watch the Broncos v Warriors game together the following weekend, a ritual they often repeat for State of Origin and other games throughout the NRL season.

A devotion to turf and lawns of flawless quality is an area where the pair are not on the same page, however. Anyone familiar with the social media accounts of Smith and Marc Leishman will know they duel for supremacy over their sprawling lawns and manicured putting greens in their respective back yards – the Cheech and Chong of Australian golf, such is their love for and knowledge of all things grass.

By his own admission, Pinfold's gardening exploits are more modest. "I've only got a tiny little strip of lawn back home," he admits, although Smith reckons he also has a touch of green thumb about him.

"He's into his hedges, did he tell you about his hedges?" Smith laughs. "He's got a hedge out the back that he shows me a photo of every time he comes around. He trims it up, and is pretty proud of it. It's pretty funny."

You sense, watching the pair at work and in conversations, that they genuinely enjoy each other's company. Of course, the Aussie-Kiwi rivalry is never too far away.

"It's with union, league, cricket... the list goes on and on," Smith says. "Sometimes we even get into it over netball. There's no more bitter rivalry than Australia v New Zealand."



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"I grew up with a lot of New Zealanders at high school, a lot of Māori dudes. I've got all the New Zealand slang down, so I occasionally whip it out when we're on the course. We have a good laugh at that. He takes the piss out of me and I take the piss out of him.

"Usually, if there's another team playing New Zealand, you want them to win; that's just how it is. But the cricket World Cup final against England last year... I think Pinna was in tears after it, he's such a passionate Kiwi. I said to him the next day, 'Mate, that was unreal. I actually feel sorry for you. You should have won, that shouldn't have happened'."

Claiming his second PGA Tour victory at the Sony Open in Hawaii in February, hot on the heels of an impressive debut at the Presidents Cup a few months earlier, where Smith iced his singles match against a red-hot Justin Thomas, confirmed for the pair that Smith's career trajectory remained on the up and up.

"His game has grown enormously," Pinfold says. "He was a very short, straight hitter and on the shorter side of professional golf from what I'd seen up to that point. He had a dynamic short game, though. But these days he's well above average in distance and is very strong; really worked hard on his body."

Pinfold rates Smith "a really good fella" and fun to be around. "He hasn't changed as a person but really developed as a player. The only thing missing is the New Zealand flag next to his name. But I'll let that slide."

"You always want to win, but you never really expect to win," Smith adds. "We always try to work our hardest and sometimes it pays off, sometimes it doesn't. The last four or five years have been gradual learning and improving curves, so hopefully we can keep that going.

"I don't think it's going to happen overnight and I think Pinna knows that. We're both in it for the long game, I think. We've both learned a lot and a lot of my learning is thanks to Pinna." □