

Paralyzed War Vet Gets \$75,000 Check

-Golfer, councilman, TPC team up to help-

By Doug Friedman, Contributing Writer

Upon receiving a check for \$75,000 from local PGA Tour Professional Kelly Gibson in the clubhouse of TPC Louisiana in Avondale on Friday, Iraq War veteran Cpl. Matthew Cole admitted he was humbled.

"It's just an incredible thing to want to do something like this for me," said Cole, paralyzed from the chest down after an insurgent mortar attack in Haditha, Iraq, nearly three years ago.

It was Cole, however, who already had humbled Gibson and others in the room Friday, such as Jefferson Parish Councilman-at-Large Tom Capella and TPC Louisiana General Manager Luke Farabaugh, with the sacrifices he has made for his country.

"I love golf, but Jack Nicklaus is not my hero. Matt Cole is my hero," Capella said. "He's the best that we have to offer and it's an honor to be a part of this."

"Being the only (pro) golfer in town, you get asked (to help) a lot, and it's sometimes a tough decision on how to help," said Gibson, whose nonprofit Feed the Relief organization partnered with Capella, TPC Louisiana and Cox Communications to make the contribution happen. "This was easy. This was the right thing to do."

"We are extremely proud to have the opportunity to support the brave men and women of our armed forces who perform selfless acts of bravery on a daily basis in order to preserve the freedom of all Americans," said Farabaugh.

Gibson and Capella became aware of Cole's situation while playing in last year's America Supports You fundraising tournament, an event to raise money for America's troops.

"When we found out Matt's story, that they (he and wife Kim) had paid off a second mortgage because they had to retrofit their house" to accommodate Cole's disability, "I looked at Kelly and Kelly looked at me, and we decided that we were going to go out and raise some money to try to help him," said Capella. "It's the least we could do. We can't ask any more of this Marine."

A native of Mandeville and a Mandeville High School graduate, Cole was a crew chief of an AAV (Amphibious Assault Vehicle, commonly known as an "AMTRAK"). He was deployed to Kuwait in January 2003 in preparation for the invasion of Iraq, and he was part of the first Marine regiment to cross in border in Iraq.

Cole returned home in 2003, but his unit was reactivated in January 2005 and deployed to Haditha, Iraq, in March 2005. On May 17, 2005, while preparing his vehicle for a patrol, Cole and another Marine were struck by a mortar round fired by insurgents.

Cole suffered injuries to his spinal cord and lungs. He was transported by medivac to the MASH unit at Al Asad air base in Iraq, then flown to Landstuhl, Germany, where he

underwent two surgeries. Part of the lower lobe of his right lung was removed and titanium pins were put in to replace shattered vertebrae.

Despite the new challenges he faces, however, Cole plans to continue toward his goal of becoming a chef. Before his deployment, he was enrolled in the Culinary Institute of New Orleans and is one class short of graduation.

Cole and wife Kim also plan to start a family, and he said Friday's gift would help immensely toward both dreams.

"We'll be able to save now for other things," Cole said. "We won't have to sweat the little things."