



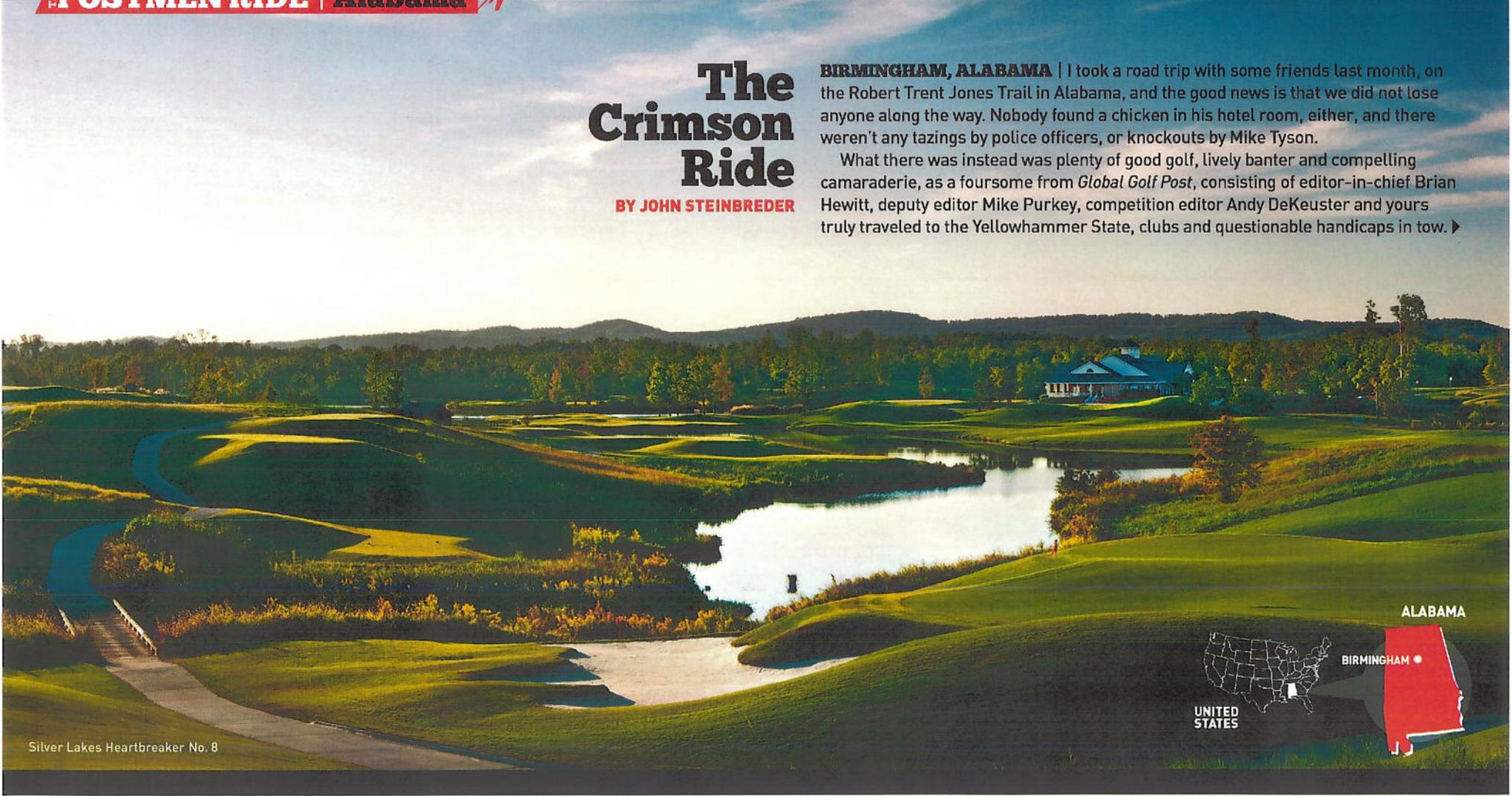
**THE POSTMEN RIDE | Alabama**

# The Crimson Ride

BY JOHN STEINBREDER

**BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA** | I took a road trip with some friends last month, on the Robert Trent Jones Trail in Alabama, and the good news is that we did not lose anyone along the way. Nobody found a chicken in his hotel room, either, and there weren't any tazings by police officers, or knockouts by Mike Tyson.

What there was instead was plenty of good golf, lively banter and compelling camaraderie, as a foursome from *Global Golf Post*, consisting of editor-in-chief Brian Hewitt, deputy editor Mike Purkey, competition editor Andy DeKeuster and yours truly traveled to the Yellowhammer State, clubs and questionable handicaps in tow. ▶



Silver Lakes Heartbreaker No. 8

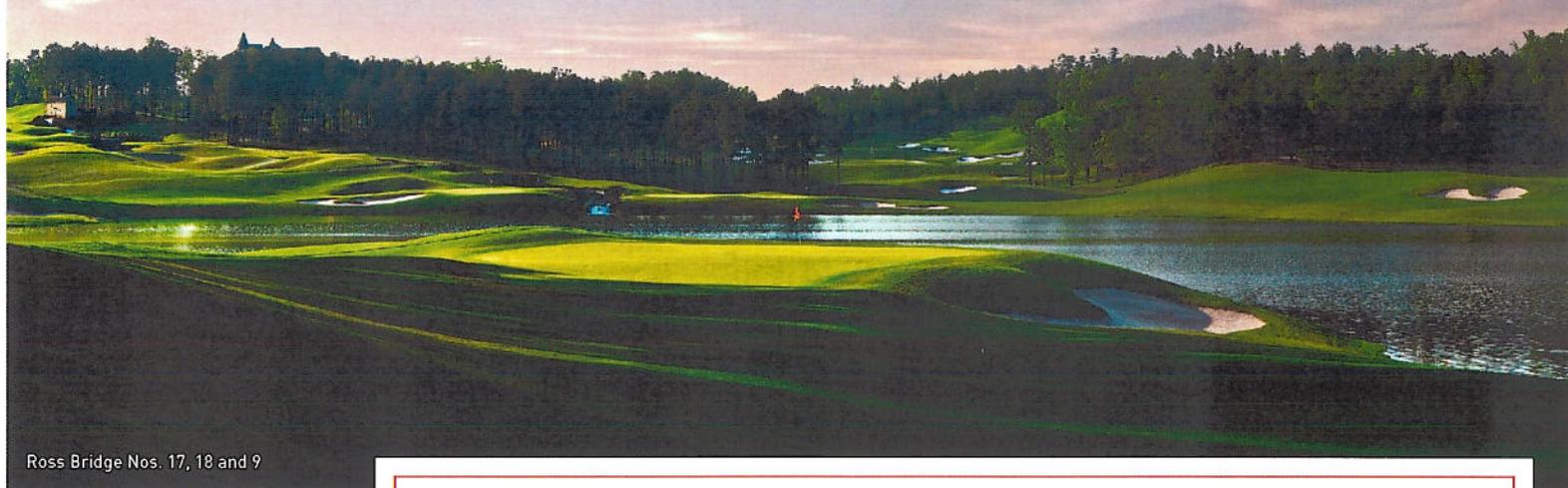


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◀ The idea was for this group, hereafter known as The Postmen, to play several layouts on this ambitious circuit of 26 courses that was built at 11 sites over the past 20 years by the Retirement Systems of Alabama to spur tourism and economic development.

We wanted to get a sense of some of the finest tracks in 'Bama and check out the well-appointed Marriott and Renaissance hotels and spas constructed at several of those spots. At the same time, we hoped to develop a feel for of the state itself, with its piney woods and pristine lakes, its fabled barbeque joints and funky truck stops and its maniacal obsession with a pair of college football teams that seems to divide the populace between those prone to chant "Roll Tide!" (Alabama) and ones who cry "War Eagle!" (Auburn).

Suffice it to say, we accomplished our mission. We played the Ridge at Oxmoor Valley first and finished with Ross Bridge, both of which lie on the woody outskirts of Birmingham, the state's biggest city. Most of the tees on those layouts are elevated, which makes driving the ball on them big fun. But many of the holes also feature blind approaches to greens cut on top of hills. I discovered I needed to add at least a couple of clubs to those shots to get close to home, and a few of the climbs to those putting surfaces were so steep I felt sure I'd find a yogi sitting cross-legged in the clouds once I reached them.



Ross Bridge Nos. 17, 18 and 9

In between those rounds, we visited the Silver Lakes complex in Anniston near Alabama's eastern border, where we sampled two of its three nines, appropriately dubbed Backbreaker and Heartbreaker for their prodigious length and difficult designs. We also checked out the scenic and somewhat more benign Schoolmaster Course in Muscle Shoals, hard by the Tennessee River in the northwest part of the state. Taken together, these courses gave our group of pretty decent players (with a range of handicap indexes from scratch to 5.5) all it could handle.

They also gave us a good taste of Alabama. At least as it exists along the roads we traveled between games. From the doublewide trailer home with lights arranged in the shape of a mammoth "A" [for the University of Alabama, ▶

### Dear Boss,

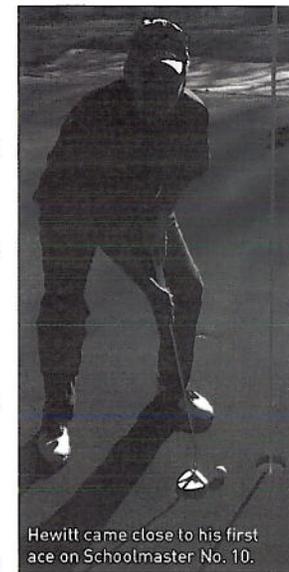
Out here in Alabama, (where the farther north you drive, the deeper into the South you get), I give thanks for the presence of fellow Postman Mike Purkey's voice. As you know, he is a native Carolinian with a syrupy vocal delivery that would reduce to pure sugar if cooked. We appointed Mike our "spokesman" when we saw the faces of Alabamans light up every time we walked into a gas station, barbeque joint or pro shop and he spoke. Mike admits he lays it on thicker when amongst fellow Southerners. All good. When he opens his mouth, it opens doors and gets attention, service and tables. It's like currency.

Moving on, in late November the Robert Trent Jones Trail is more like the road less taken. Having the Ross Bridge course mostly to ourselves on a brisk, sunny, crystalline day was a treat to be savored like the banana pudding dessert at Dreamland BBQ in nearby Birmingham. (But I'll let DeKeuster give you the deets on that confection.)

Had no idea how pretty the hills of Alabama are in autumn. Had no idea how valuable a reliable GPS could be. Had no idea how much longer elevated greens can make a course play. And had no idea how the 6-iron I pured to within two inches of the cup on the 10th hole at the Schoolmaster Course near Muscle Shoals on Day Three didn't go into the hole. Alas, I remain career ace-less, which makes my undistinguished golf résumé even more unremarkable.

Finally, they have got a couple of courses on The Trail with back tees that stretch beyond 8,000 yards. Me, personally, I'm more into golf than exploring. But I'm sure Lewis and Clark would have loved playing from the tips if they were still alive.

—Your eldest Postman, Brian Hewitt



Hewitt came close to his first ace on Schoolmaster No. 10.

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### Dear Boss,

I was standing at the counter at Bunyan's Bar-B-Que in Florence, Ala., waiting to order a fried pie for dessert. Beside me, placing an order for dinner, was a 30-ish woman. She glanced over at me and I smiled and said, "Hi."

"I don't know about that hat you've got on," she said with a scowl. "But you're gonna wear what you're gonna wear."

I responded with a nervous chuckle before going back to my seat to enjoy the rest of my fabulous barbeque dinner with the rest of The Postmen. The woman, armed with her take-out order, looked back at me and said, "You need to do something about that hat."

For a minute, I had no idea what she was talking about. Then it hit me. The previous day, I had bought a hat at Silver Lakes because I mistakenly left my Masters hat in my hotel room at the Renaissance Ross Bridge in Birmingham.

Silver Lakes has three nines and each has its own name. And those names are emblazoned on the side of the hat that was the only thing the woman in Bunyan's noticed. They are: Mindbreaker, Heartbreaker and Backbreaker.

She, of course, didn't know anything about golf or Silver Lakes. She thought I was advertising my abilities in other areas. Boy, was she ever mistaken. **- Purkey**



Native Southerner Purkey got caught with his hat on.

◀ of course) illuminating the front porch at dusk to a gas station with a tanning bed in a room next to the coolers of Coca-Cola and Bud Light.

We passed pastures full of cattle in northern Alabama and fields of crops as well as yards cluttered with ragged furniture and old kitchenware that gave them the feel of a permanent yard sale. There were roadside joints selling chicken wings, and one agricultural concern with a sign that read simply: "Funny Farm."

We also found some world-class barbeque. One was a down-home place in Florence called Bunyan's, with fall-off-the-bone, finger-licking-great ribs and sides of "hot slaw" and

"smoky beans" as well as a peppery white sauce that tasted good with everything. One local writer liked the place so much he gave it six stars. Out of a possible five.

Another winner was Dreamland in Birmingham, where the tender pulled pork had just the right amount of bite and bark. That eatery also offered a banana pudding so ethereal in taste and structure that I could only eat it with my eyes half-closed and my head tilted slightly toward the heavens – as if I was thanking the gods who no doubt had a hand in making it. Even the "Big Daddy" iced tea at Dreamland was worthy of note, with the one Southerner in our bunch, Mike Pur-

key, declaring it the best he had ever drunk. Strong words from a man who knows his tea. And he swears it wasn't the caffeine talking.

We spent four days in 'Bama and found that the combination of the golf and interesting sights made the RTJ Trail an ideal venue for this sort of buddy trip. Part of it was the golf courses themselves, reasonably priced yet highly rated tracks that were largely laid out by Trent Jones' chief designer in those days, Roger Rulewich. The spirited games of "Sixes" we invariably played added to the overall enjoyment of the journey, to say nothing of the relentless kibitzing that went on during each round. ▶

- ▶ Dr. David Bronner, chief executive officer of the Retirement Systems of Alabama, is credited with conceiving the idea of a golf trail as a way to diversify the holdings of the state's pension fund and also help Alabama attract new business and increase tourism. Construction of the first RTJ course started in late 1990, and the initial ones opened two years later. Today, the trail has 26 layouts at 11 sites with a total of 468 holes. And they are serviced by eight Marriott and Renaissance hotels, five of which have spas.
- ▶ One of the RTJ Trail tracks, the Senator Course at Capitol Hill outside Montgomery, hosts the Navistar LPGA Classic. Rising star Lexi Thompson won the event there in 2011, making her – at the time – the youngest winner ever on that circuit.

- ▶ Elevation changes abound on the four RTJ Trail courses The Postmen played, and that made it difficult to discern distances for approaches. Many of the holes played to elevated greens, and we determined that not only added a club or two for individual shots but also another 300 or 400 yards to the total yardage on the scorecard. Our advice: Be sure to take enough club on those uphill approaches, and consider playing up one set of tees from those you first think might be best.

- ▶ Music lovers will enjoy the significance of the Muscle Shoals stop on the RTJ Trail, for it is where session musicians Barry Beckett, Roger Hawkins, Jimmy Johnson and David Hood founded the great Muscle

Shoals Sound Studio in 1969. They became known as the Muscle Shoals Sound Rhythm Section, and were later immortalized in the Lynyrd Skynyrd song Sweet Home Alabama as "the Swampers." Guitar virtuoso Duane Allman worked there for a while, recording at the studio with Wilson Pickett, Aretha Franklin and King Curtis, among others. And notables who cut albums there include the Rolling Stones, Boz Scaggs, Paul Simon and Bob Dylan.

- ▶ Though we spent most of our time in Birmingham on the golf course – or at the downtown barbeque temple called Dreamland – there were plenty of other things for us to do there, had we had the time. Visiting the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, for one. Others include a tour of the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum, which has perhaps the best collection of motorcycles in the world, and a course at the Porsche Sport Driving School.



- ▶ And speaking of Dreamland, it is worth noting that Birmingham is but one of eight places in 'Bama that boast an outpost of that fine eatery. Which means that anyone traveling the RTJ Trail will never be too far from first-rate 'cue.

[www.dreamlandbbq.com](http://www.dreamlandbbq.com)

J.S.

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The banana pudding at Dreamland BBQ

**Hi Boss,**

Well, I don't think I'll be making it back to Orlando. I've found something here in Alabama that has made it impossible to leave. Now, the golf here along the Robert Trent Jones Trail is fantastic, but the banana pudding at Dreamland BBQ is life-changing. First of all, I knew we were in for a treat when we asked our waiter what was on the dessert menu, and he responded, "banana pudding or banana pudding." He promised us we wouldn't be disappointed, and let me tell you, he was right.

It was cold, it was creamy, it was sweet ... it was like watching a purely struck 8-iron fly toward the pin, pitch 10 feet short and roll like a putt right into the bottom of the hole. It was so good it made me forget about the bogeys and double-bogeys I've made over the past couple of days while traveling the RTJ Trail. It was so good, the four of us couldn't stop at one pint-sized serving, we had to ask for seconds.

But fear not boss, if you are desiring a taste of this Alabama treasure, Dreamland BBQ will ship it to you. Though they do have a disclaimer saying they are not responsible for any damage to the package, I promise you this, it's worth the risk. The reward is just too, too tasty.

— The young'un, **Andy DeKeuster**



◀ But it was also the war stories we shared while dining around and driving together. Of sports beats followed and Super Bowls covered. Of memorable Masters and Open Championships. Of exotic assignments to places like Portugal and New South Wales, Fiji and Morocco. And of interviews with char-

acters throughout our careers.

Such as one I had some time ago with Willie Nelson, who inadvertently helped me understand what compelled Toby Keith to pen the country music classic, *I'll Never Smoke Weed With Willie Again*. And the time Hewitt witnessed former Chicago Cubs manager Herman

Franks end an interview by responding to a reporter's innocent query of whether he had ever seen a certain play in baseball before with the line: "Well, I once saw a monkey #&@& a camel."

And as you might expect with a group of scribes, lots of time was spent quoting writers of much greater repute, whether Henry David Thoreau or Dan Jenkins, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe or Jim Murray, and admiring their wisdom and wit. We also proved ourselves quite capable of recounting favorite movies, with Purkey raising eyebrows the highest with his near stoner renditions of dialogue from the stoner comedy, *Friday*.

Buddy trips in such convivial settings take on a certain rhythm, with participants unconsciously assuming specific roles as things unfold. ▶



Oxmoor Valley No. 11

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◀ Everyone took more or less the same seats in the SUV we rented, with my serving most of the time as the wheelman and Hewitt the navigator in the passenger seat, his portable GPS system always at the ready. Ever the editor-in-chief, he also was the one who decided the cart pairings each day and how the golf games would be played.

From the back seat, DeKeuster handled most logistical issues, such as obtaining directions to restaurants, and as the youngster in the group, he did most of the listening when the oldsters started telling tales. As the best player in the bunch, Andy also carded the majority of the on-course birdies and seemed most disappointed when his elderly playing partners headed to bed each evening before 9 p.m. instead of to the bar. And Purkey assumed the role of fixer whenever a problem

arose, due to his smooth Carolina drawl that worked wonders with the denizens of Dixie.

Truth be told, though, we didn't need much fixing on the RTJ Trail. Travel from course to course went smoothly, and we were welcomed warmly wherever we went. The stories were always good, even if the golf often was not, and so was the barbeque.

And as I mentioned at the start, we even managed not to lose anyone. ●



Schoolmaster No. 8

### Dear Boss,

Normally, the completion of a golf round is quickly followed by a trip to the 19th hole for adult refreshments, the paying off of bets and the requisite discussions of shots made and missed. But this day is different, and we pile into our SUV as soon as we finish at the Schoolmaster course in Muscle Shoals and hurry down the road. Our destination is Quigley's General Store in nearby Iron City, Tenn. And our goal is the purchase of Powerball tickets for that evening's drawing, with the pot standing at a record \$585 million.

You would not think we'd need to cross state lines for such an innocuous – and illogical given the outlandish odds – purchase. But Alabama doesn't do lotteries, and this one is too big to miss.

Twenty minutes later, The Postmen pull into Quigley's. The dirt-and-

gravel parking lot is filled with pickup trucks, and I feel decidedly out of place as I walk to the front door wearing Banana Republic khakis and an Augusta National wind shirt as well as Peter Millar loafers. And no socks. My attire does not exactly match that of the Quigley regulars, most of whom feature some form of camouflage and blaze orange, or Crimson Tide-logged merchandise.

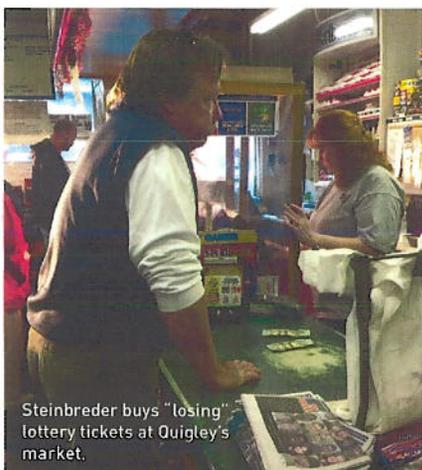
Not surprisingly, there is a long line to the register, as folks are coming from far and wide, as we have, to get into the lottery game. While waiting, I check out a sign describing the barbeque they cook in the massive smoker outside each Saturday. The selection of beer in the cooler is impressive, and so is the fact there's a hardware store here as well. I admire the owner's work ethic when I see that Mr. Quigley opens at 3:30 a.m.

every Monday through Friday, and 6 a.m. on weekends.

And then I watch a kid behind the counter fry catfish and chicken tenders, while another makes pizza. Most everyone in line carries a six-pack of beer under his or her arms. And the half dozen or so people in front of me buy cigarettes along with their Powerball tickets. When it's my turn, I lay down a sawbuck and take possession of 10 different number combinations. The winning numbers, I tell myself.

We all jump back into the SUV and drive off. Then we do what every other person who comes to Quigley's that day probably does. Which is talk about what we are going to do with our winnings.

It is fun to fantasize about the possibilities, and to soak up the scene at the general store. Even if it means missing the post-round beer. **–Steiny**



Steinbreder buys "losing" lottery tickets at Quigley's market.