

Vinny Del Negro

On target in the off season

Summer is a perfect time for Bulls' head coach Vinny Del Negro to hone his golf skills

By Matt Beardmore

Wearing a white hat, brown shorts and a white polo shirt emblazoned with the Chicago Bulls logo, he seemed at ease on the practice range as he hammered ball after ball through the light breeze of a nearly cloudless sky.

The distinctive smack of his new, oversized Ping driver gave observers every reason to believe he had spent his entire summer vacation refining his game.

But Vinny Del Negro, one year in as head coach of the Chicago Bulls, had little or no time this summer to think about the game he fell in love with 16 years ago after picking up a set of his friend's left-handed clubs.

"Yeah, (my game's) been done for a few months now," Del Negro said with a smile, pulling out a new rescue club from his bag. "I've only played a couple times (in Arizona) in the past four months and that's just going out and messing around with my buddies. Ever since I took the job it's been a little crazy."

That's understandable considering Del Negro, formerly the assistant general manager of the Phoenix Suns, had no head coaching experience. At any level.

But on this Sunday afternoon at White Pines Golf Club in Bensenville, there was no hint of the just-completed or upcoming season as Chicago's bench boss joined a host of current and former



PHOTO COURTESY CHICAGO BULLS

Bulls at a charity golf outing.

"I'm going to be checking the scorecards afterward," Del Negro joked with the participants during lunch. "The 3-foot putts are not gimmes!"

In this banquet hall packed with current and former hoopsters, Del Negro, a 1 handicap, was probably the last one who would need to take a mulligan. The former North Carolina State basketball standout has competed at the Tahoe Celebrity Golf Week, John Elway Celebrity Classic and Mario Lemieux Celebrity Invitational.

Del Negro is a member of the picturesque Whisper Rock Golf Club in Scottsdale, Ariz.

"I used to play a lot, but I don't play as much anymore," said Del Negro moments before launching a straight-as-an-arrow 5-iron. "But I love it. I love the competitiveness. No cell phones, just relaxing. But it can be frustrating, there's no question about it."

A slice by Del Negro is eyed by an approaching Tyrus Thomas, the Bulls forward who was having his own struggles at the far end of the practice area.

"You got all of that one," jabbed Thomas at his coach.

So what's more challenging, standing over a putt with a major at stake or having 20,000 people scream at you as you try to sink a game-winning free throw on the road?

"It all depends on who's taking the free throw and who's making the putt," Del Negro said.

"For me, a free throw would be much, much easier than a putt," added Del Negro, an 84 percent career free throw shooter during 12 NBA seasons. "It's whatever you feel more comfortable with. The more you put yourself in those situations, the more you'll be able to handle it."

That's likely the same advice he'll give his Bulls this season as they try to become a playoff team for the second consecutive season. 🏀

Matt Beardmore is a Chicago-based freelance writer.

<p>THE SHORT GAME WITH Vinny Del Negro</p>	<p>AGE: 42</p>	<p>SWITCH-HITTER: Plays golf as a left-hander but does everything else right-handed, except in baseball, where he was a switch-hitter growing up.</p>	<p>CLAIM TO FAME: Played a round with Arnold Palmer at the Palmer-designed Tartan Fields Golf Club in Dublin, Ohio.</p>	<p>DREAM PAIRING: Tiger Woods, Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Phil Mickelson.</p>
	<p>HANDICAP: 1</p>			
	<p>BEST ROUND: 67 at Whisper Rock Golf Club, Scottsdale, Ariz.</p>			
	<p>EQUIPMENT: A new set of Pings.</p>			