

Episode 31: Kevin saved a life while golfing

If you were out in public somewhere, just going about your day, and you saw someone collapse – someone you don't know – what would you do? Most people don't really know what they would do, until they're actually put in that situation.

There are stories of people who witness something like this, and they just freeze. Or, if it's a busy place like a public sidewalk and someone is on the ground, a lot of times everyone will just walk by. It's an unfortunate psychology thing with humans called diffusion of responsibility – everyone thinks that someone else will help. And as a result, no one helps.

Thankfully, not everyone is like that. There are some people who see a situation, maybe a person in distress, and their first thought is "What can I do to help this person?"

One of those people is Kevin Purcell, who you'll meet in today's episode.

Kevin is the Executive Director of the New Jersey State Golf Association. One day about a year ago, Kevin was finishing up a round of golf, and he saw something was happening on the course. As he looked more closely, he could see that a man was on the ground.

The man who had collapsed was Carlos Tapia, and he was having a heart attack.

In today's episode, we'll hear from Kevin what happened. And I was also able to get a few comments from Carlos, to get his perspective on that day.

Couple of things I wanted to mention –

For clubs or courses that would like to get involved with providing CPR training for your staff, I'll have links to that in the show notes for this episode, at WhatWasThatLike.com/31

And I also want to thank my friend Paul for connecting me with Kevin. If you're looking for new podcasts to listen to, Paul publishes an email newsletter that helps with that. Every Wednesday he highlights three podcast episodes that he has found interesting. Check it out at PaulKondo.com – that's PAULKONDO.COM. I don't know if he's related to Marie Kondo or not, but his sense of humor does spark joy for me and maybe you'll like it too.

And if you'd like to join others who support this show for as little as \$1 per month, you can do that at WhatWasThatLike.com/support.

And now, let's meet Kevin.

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Scott

On that day - at the golf course - how many other people, do you think, knew CPR?

Kevin

I've thought about this, after the fact. There's a pool at the golf course. There are 3 or 4 lifeguards at the pool - they probably knew CPR. I would imagine that, at any golf course, out of 100 people, there would probably be a handful who'd know CPR. Obviously, there are some doctors who are members of the club, and they, obviously, would have known CPR.

Scott

Yeah, it's good to have somebody like that around. I was doing a little bit of a background check on this. Before we spoke, I found out some interesting statistics. There are basically 3 things. 1) Over half of Americans say that they know how to perform CPR. 2) Only 1 out of 6 knows that the recommended technique no longer includes breaths - it's compressions only. 3) Only 1 out of 10 know the actual correct pace for those compressions - which is 100 to 120. How did you happen to know how to do CPR the right way?

Kevin

In my previous job, I was the general manager of a few golf courses for the county of Bergen. We had 5 golf courses and we managed a lot of those golf courses with a lot of part-time staff. Each year, we would have an orientation for those staff members in our headquarters. The orientation would occasionally have CPR training, but not every year. I didn't do the CPR training every year, but I was around for it. Every year, we did it. I heard it all the time. I heard - when that change came on board - that you no longer had to do the breaths. So, through repetitions of those pieces of training, I remembered enough to muddle my way through when it was an important time to remember.

Scott

That's good. A lot of it stuck then. Take us through what happened that day. Where were you? Where did this actually happen?

Kevin

So, it actually happened on the first tee of the golf course. I was finishing my round of golf. It was about 11:30 to 12 O'clock. I had just finished the 18th hole and was walking up the hill. There's a hill behind the 18th hole. Then, there'll be a little cart path and some steps up to the 12th tee, which is adjacent to the first tee.

Scott

Is this at the course where you normally play?

Kevin

Yeah. This is at the club, Forest Hill Field Club in Bloomfield, New Jersey - that's where I grew up playing. Since I've become the executive director of the State Golf Association, I have gone back there as a member and thoroughly enjoyed being there. So, I walked up the hill to where the cart path is. I happened to look over towards the first tee and saw a friend of mine standing oddly and looking straight down. I had a quick glance but didn't think much of it. I went back to my scorecard. I was filling out the card with a lackluster round of golf. I didn't finish particularly well on the 18th hole, so I wasn't in the best of moods. I walked up the stairs to the same level as the 12th tee and looked over to the first tee. I realized that there was somebody on the ground and my instincts took over. I just ran over there. When I got there, he was laying on the ground. My friend Frank was on base. He was standing over him and trying to talk to him. So, I knelt down and the man was completely unresponsive. I did not know him. I didn't even know his name. He was laying on his side. His eyes were wide open and he was breathing laboriously. He had fallen in a way that his glasses were mangled around his eyes and cut the bridge of his nose. So, the first thing I did while he was breathing like that was I lifted his head. I wanted to make sure that there wasn't anything clogging his throat. So, I lifted his head as I got the glasses out of there. He was still breathing still at that time, so I thought, "Okay, what do I do now?". My first thought was, "If he's breathing, the body wants to stay alive. So, let's let him breathe and see if it could correct itself." Again, he was not responsive. There was no response at all from him when I waved my hand in front of his eyes and Frank called his name from behind me. So, we were just monitoring him. At that moment, a young lady came and knelt down on the other side of him. She said, "I'm a doctor's assistant". She immediately reached for his wrist and said, "I have a pulse". So, I said to her, "Well, he's breathing. He has a pulse. Let's just see what's going on. Let's just leave it be for a minute". Almost instantaneously, she said, "I'm losing the pulse". Then, he stopped breathing. At that point, she said, "Do you know CPR?". I said, "Well, we're gonna find out" - I didn't say that. I put him on his back. I found his breast breastplate, put one hand over another, and started compressions. So, a year prior to this - at a meeting that we have for all of our golf courses - the member clubs came to a meeting that we had speakers come to. I had the opportunity to speak and introduce some of those speakers. As part of my introduction, I had said that golf courses should really have CPR training - because I remember us doing it at the public golf courses. I had just recently heard on the radio that the rhythm for compressions goes to the song "Stayin Alive", and that came to me at that moment. So, I started singing it to myself as I was doing the compressions - knowing that I needed to push the blood from the chest cavity all the way to the brain. I realized that I was pushing pretty hard, but I kept doing that - he was a big man. I realized that - not from looking at the length of his body - when I moved his head to get the glasses out, for me, it was a heavy head. I thought,

"He's a big man. I've gotta push to make sure that this happens". It turns out that the gentleman was 6'8". I was pushing hard, thinking, "I've got to move this blood from his chest to his brain". That continued until there was, kind of, a jerk. He sat up. About a quarter of the way, he took a big breath, went back on his back again, and started breathing laboriously.

Scott

How many other people were around you at this time?

Kevin

It was me and Nicole. I could hear Frank behind me. I didn't realize, until after the fact, that there were 20 people around us.

Scott

Yeah. Of course. During something like that, you'll have tunnel vision.

Kevin

Yeah. I couldn't see anybody other than the young lady next to me - who I didn't know either. I heard Frank's voice behind me trying to coax him back. Other than that, I didn't know if anybody was around because I was really focused on him.

Scott

With a crowd like that, I'm sure somebody had already called 911.

Kevin

Correct. Our golf professional, Jason Fiori, had called 911. So, after he came back the first time, went out again. So, we started compressions and kept that going. It wasn't until the second time that I could actually hear an ambulance siren coming in the background. Let me tell you... in the heat of the moment, it seemed like it took an hour for it to get there. CPR is actually tiring to perform because you're using your entire body to generate enough energy to make the compression. So, I could hear the ambulance in the background but didn't pay much attention to it. I knew that was common and kept the compressions going. Again, there was a jerk from his body. He sat up quickly - only a quarter or so - came off the ground a little bit, and started breathing really hard again. At that time, again I remembered to make sure that there was clear airflow. I wanted to get a look at his mouth to make sure that he didn't have anything in his mouth, and there wasn't. It was just this very difficult breathing. It was, like, a bad snore, where somebody falls asleep on a chair in an unnatural position. He's got that bad snore. So that's what it was. He was still unresponsive. There was no reaction over his eyes, which were wide open. So, we let them monitor him again. Then, he went out again. So, this happened, in my estimation, 4 or 5 times before the EMTs arrived.

Scott

That part of it just seems so unusual to me because when you see somebody performing CPR in a movie or on TV, they would immediately come back. It's like, "Oh, he's back! Thankfully, he's okay now". Even on a CPR demo or instruction, you would bring them back. I haven't heard of them going back in and coming back out of it - back and forth - several times like that.

Kevin

Yeah. As I said, it happened at least 4-5 times before the EMTs came. When the EMTs came, I thought that I could just back off and they would take over, but that wasn't the case. 1 person came around from the back of his head to put on an airbag. Then, the other person went across

from me to replace Nicole and started unraveling the portable defibrillator. They took off the pads, placed the pads, and took the shirt off. They placed the pads in the right spot. During this time, I was still doing the CPR compressions. The EMT who was at the head of the patient said to me, "I'd like you to do it a little deeper and a little slower". So, I adjusted. Then, there came a time when the defibrillator was ready and charged. So, these things are amazing pieces of equipment. It's really set up for a person who knows nothing about them.

Scott

What you're talking about is called an AED.

Kevin

An AED, yeah. It's a portable defibrillator. It was going to measure the heart and monitor the heart, once the pads are in place. 1 goes on the chest. There's a picture on it. 1 goes on the chest, 1 goes on the side of the chest, and it sends a pulse through. So, it measures the electric waves that are in the heart and shocks him to restabilize those waves. It got to the point where it needed to do that. So it went off automatically and said "Charging clear". That's when everyone backs away so that they don't get shocked. His whole body convulsed, jumped off the ground, and went back down. Then, he had another rhythm. He was back again, but not conscious. At that stage, they said, "Okay, let's pack him up". So, they kind of moved him around and put him on the gurney. As they were about to move him out, he went out again, so they started CPR while he was on the gurney until they got him to a stable state. Then, they moved through the back of the clubhouse, out towards the parking lot, and took him.

Scott

I read part of what you wrote about earlier. One of the things you said was Nicole calmed you while you were doing the compressions. Can you talk about that? How did she do that?

Kevin

Absolutely. She just said, "What's your name?". I said, "Kevin". She said, "Okay. So, you know how to do CPR. Let's just take this one step at a time." Just having somebody's voice in my ear that wasn't panicky at that moment was calming for me. She said she was a doctor's assistant and she knew this stuff. I found out later that she had actually never performed CPR before, but had obviously taken a pulse for every patient that came into the office. So, she was just a steady hand there while things about what I could be doing for the man were racking around in my brain.

Scott

Isn't it amazing that - in a situation like that - people who don't even know each other can, all of a sudden, form a team? You all have the same goal.

Kevin

Yeah.

Scott

Everybody just works together.

Kevin

Yeah. Just knowing that there were other people behind me who had already called for an ambulance-- if I had come upon this man by myself, I don't even know if I would have thought of calling an ambulance until 2 or 3 repetitions of this thing. As I said before, I didn't know who was

around me. I knew Nicole was there, but if I was only by myself, I would have been racking my brain, trying to figure out how to help this man - and might not have thought about the ambulance. When you do CPR training, the first thing you should do is to make that call to the ambulance before you start anything else.

Scott

Yeah, or instruct someone else nearby to make the call.

Kevin

Yeah.

Scott

That aside, have you ever seen the episode of The Office about CPR training?

Kevin

I have not.

Scott

Oh, man.

Kevin

After having gone through our own training here in our office, I can imagine that it is a pretty good episode.

Scott

It is pretty good. I'll link that in the show notes. You'll get a kick out of that.

Kevin

Great.

Scott

So they loaded him into the ambulance. At that point, he was just off to the hospital then. Right?

Kevin

Correct. I was standing on that first tee. When I looked up, for the first time, I could finally focus on something other than him on the gurney. I realized that there were a lot of people standing around - some of them were within an arm's length, some were 10-20 yards away, and some were all the way on the other side of the 12th tee. There were a lot of people standing there. I thought to myself, "I can't speak to any of these people right now". Some of them came toward me saying, "Wow. That was great". I was like, "Yep. Thank you" and I just moved away to the closest door of the clubhouse and walked into the clubhouse. I remember that it was still early in the morning. I wanted to get to a room where I could just decompress and just take a moment. I thought the shower room would probably be the best because it was still early. Nobody had made their way there yet. So, I went into the shower room. I was alone for a little bit. I thought to myself, "Holy cow. What just happened?" At that time, my brother, Tim, came in - he was on the property. I don't think we had played together, but we may have played together. Anyway, he came in, put his arm around me, and said, "Wow, that was incredible!" We stood there and cried for a little bit.

(Snuffling)

Sorry.

So, we talked a little bit. We were able to clear the air and just talk through what happened. Eventually, it was time to get on with the day. We were gonna have lunch on the patio. So, I went out to the patio and sat there. Again, everybody was coming up to me, saying that I was incredible and everything. I just had time to relax, take a few breaths, and sit down.

Scott

Yeah. It takes time to process all of it.

Kevin

Yeah.

Scott

As you said, "What just happened?"

Kevin

Yeah.

Scott

Man.

Kevin

To go into something like that-- I always wondered if I'd be the kind of guy who would be happy to jump in and do that. I had done CPR training - it had been 6 years since I had done it. You're not thinking about that as you're walking toward somebody who's down on the ground. When I knelt down, I just knelt down out of compassion for the person - I guess, I don't know - to see if I could do something and it turned out that I could.

Scott

He was very fortunate to have you standing by and noticing something. This man's name is Carlos Tapia. I was able to contact him and actually got a few comments to get his perspective on what happened that day.

Carlos

Hi, my name is Carlos Tapia. I joined the Forest Hill Golf Club in Bloomfield, New Jersey. I'm 76 years old. By August 27, around next week, it will have been one year since my second chance, thanks to Kevin Purcell. On this same day last year, I was teeing off in the first call and collapsed. I went into cardiac arrest. Kevin was finishing 18 holes and could see something was going on. So, he ran to where I was and started performing CPR for about 10 minutes until the ambulance arrived. I was electrically shocked in the ambulance via the defibrillator. I was able to play within 30 days after 2 weeks of getting a pacemaker. I would say that Kevin is a wonderful person. If it weren't for him, I don't think we'd be recording this right now. I will be grateful to him for the rest of my life.

Scott

He's obviously a grateful guy.

Kevin

It's pretty cool hearing that.

Scott

What's amazing is he was playing golf again within a month after that.

Kevin

I saw him at a tournament a month later. I couldn't believe it. Somebody told me, "I think Carlos is playing in this tournament". We have a big tournament called the Silver Putter in September. I said, "Get out of here". Sure enough, I saw him a little later that day. He came over and gave me a big hug. We didn't know each other. That was the first time we were meeting. We got to talk a little bit. As you can tell, he's Argentinian and, I said before, he's 6' 8" inches tall. He had played for the Argentinian national basketball team. He had joined the club not too long ago, so we haven't had a chance to cross paths, so it was really cool to meet him that day. It is really amazing.

Scott

Did he recognize you or did you recognize him? Did other people just say, "Hey. You guys need to talk to each other"?

Kevin

I think other people put us together. Yeah. It's hard to miss him because he's that big of a man - he's at 6' 8". You don't have many 6' 8" people walking around a golf club. So, I saw him when he was coming. We developed a friendship since and it's just wonderful.

Scott

That's cool. Now, you and he were in attendance at an event. Can you tell us about that?

Kevin

Yeah. So, the Metropolitan Golf Writers Association gives out an award each year for somebody who has performed some sort of humanitarian act - saved a life or did something similar. The name of the award is the Mary B Porter award. It's given at their annual dinner where they also give out 5 or 6 other awards. There's the Club of the Year and the Gold Tee award, which went to professional golfer, Jim Furyk, that year. It was at the beginning of this past summer. The neat thing was Mary B Porter was there. I was able to sit next to her on that day. We talked about her life-saving act, which happened back in the 80s when she was a player on the LPGA Tour. She had noticed some commotion in a pool adjacent to the fairway that she was on. So, she was close enough to the property line. She went over to the fence while her playing partner played a shot. She realized that there was a kid struggling in the pool, so she worked her way over the fence with the help of her caddy. She got over there. The kid's father was there but he was so distraught when he grabbed his kid out of the pool - the kid was unresponsive - that he just handed the kid to Mary B. Porter. Mary didn't know what she was doing - pretty much like me. She turned the kid upside down. She shook him a little bit and got enough water out of him for him to start breathing again. She saved a life. So, that was an award that I was happy to get, but it's certainly not necessary - I said that in my acceptance speech after I had a couple of minutes to just say 'Thank you'. I said that this is a really neat award and it's nice to be recognized, but it really is unnecessary. I said, "The real reason why this is cool is because of the gentleman standing over here". So, I pointed out into the crowd and Carlos stood up. I said, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Carlos Tapia" and the crowd stood to their feet. As I said, there were 400 people in the room. It was an incredible night...

Scott

The crowd went wild.

Kevin

The crowd went wild, for sure. Yeah.

Scott

Well, now, you're on some sort of a crusade to get CPR training and everything on golf courses and clubs. How is that working or what's your involvement with that?

Kevin

I realized - after getting so many nice notes from friends and strangers - I should try to motivate clubs to have their staff better trained. So, I wrote an article for our magazine. Remember, I'm the executive director at a State Golf Association - we have a magazine. There are about 65,000 members in our association that get the magazine. So, I wrote an article to be published in that magazine. We had made arrangements with the American Red Cross. A young lady came out and sat with us. She told us about how easy it would be to do training for the clubs. So, we arranged a program for them, through our website, to get connected with the American Red Cross, to set up training in their local area for their staff members if they wanted to. Then, we started promoting it at our golf summit. At this year's golf summit, we had Courtney come out and talk about the program. We're still in the process of trying to get clubs to engage with this program and get their staff trained.

Scott

It's obvious that a program like that is, absolutely, going to save lives.

Kevin

Yeah, I agree. In November, I'll be getting together with the International Association of Golf Administrators - I'm a member - so I'll also speak about it there. Hopefully, some other associations will also get this program as part of their benefits for clubs.

Scott

Yeah, that's great. Well, whatever links we can provide to other clubs or golf courses that want to get involved with this - to get the training for their staff - I'll put those links in the show notes for this episode. So, they can see that there. Great job. It was a bad day of golf for you, but that's a good way to end it, right?

Kevin

Absolutely. There's never really a bad day at golf but this one was pretty special. This will be one I'll remember for the rest of my life, for sure.

Scott

Thanks for listening. My goal for each episode is to bring you people and stories that you just won't find on other podcasts. If you'd like to discuss this episode or previous episodes with other listeners, you can do that at our private Facebook group at [WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.facebook.com/WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook). I hope to see you in there! And if you'd like to support the show, you can do that at [WhatWasThatLike.com/support](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/support). And I'll see you in 2 weeks when we'll once again be asking the question, What Was That Like?