Workers clean and sort live crawfish at Randol's crawfish plant, next to the restaurant on Kaliste Saloom Road.

Photo by Claudia B. Lenoir/Press
@theadvertiser.com
When Phil Mickelson made The Putt Sunday to win the Masters (and it will always be known as The Putt), he made more than mere history.

He made believer.

Long chronicled as the best golfer alive to never win a Major, Mickelson could have been forgiven if he thought the gods were against him. A winner of countless PGA tournaments, he had always managed to come up short in the big ones, a fact that the media and casual fans were always quick to point out. To them, Mickelson was a choke artist, an unfortunate soul with overflowing talent and a heart the size of a Titleist. He could blow away a field in your everyday tour event but on the back nine of a Major, he was always everyone’s favorite choice to crash and burn.

Mickelson looked like he was having fun. While the CBS announcers spouted ominous warnings of pressure-filled shots-to-come, Mickelson exuded the air of a Sunday walk through the azaleas and not a care in the world.

That changed Sunday. Always immensely popular (only in golf do we look upon multimillionaires as underdogs), Mickelson was a flag-bearer for hope. Although fans actively dislike certain tour stars for various reasons (Tiger wins too much, Faldo has no personality, Sergio’s a spoiled brat), there are others to whom the general public just naturally wants to cuddle. Guys like Freddy Couples seem so nice and unassuming (read: non-threatening) that Freddy’s automatically a fan favorite every time he tees it up.

Mickelson was like that. Because of his perfect record of failure in the Majors (0-42), we actually felt sorry for him (again, only in golf) and the never-ending string of close-ups as he walked off countless 18th greens at places like Augusta an also-ran, a poster child for anguish and despair, are etched in our memory.

Although I never enjoy failure (well, maybe the Lakers), neither did I buy into Mickelson’s mystique of sorrow. Suck it up, pal. I usually thought, as he trudged through the closing holes of a Major. But one look at that face always told me it wasn’t a matter of if he’d lose, but rather when.

That changed Sunday. Mickelson entered the final day tied with Chris DiMarco for the lead and both labored on the front nine. By the time Mickelson stood over a birdie putt at No. 12, he was three strokes behind a charging Ernie Els, who had just eagled the 13th. But Mickelson holed the putt to stay alive and, if you watched the telecast closely, you noticed something strange happening out there.

Mickelson looked like he was having fun. Trailing one of the best golfers in the world with just a few holes remaining and always aware of his reputation for failure down the stretch, Mickelson never lost his chipmunk smile. While the CBS announcers spouted ominous warnings of pressure-filled shots-to-come, Mickelson exuded the air of a Sunday walk through the azaleas and not a care in the world.

I don’t know about you, but that was the moment I thought the guy was going to win. Even when he had to settle for par at the 15th when a bad drive all but eliminated birdie and especially when he nailed a 15-footer for birdie at the scary 16th. When he nutted his drive over 300 yards on the closing hole, we were having as much fun as it looked like he was. By the time he curled in the 18-footer that won it (after playing partner DiMarco had blasted out of a bunker just inches behind Mickelson’s mark thereby offering a read on the putt), the Masters was a forgone conclusion and the curse all but forgotten.

It wasn’t that Mickelson won that’s swayed me to his corner but the way he did it. Many golf tournaments are lost, not won, but Mickelson shot 31 on the finishing nine Sunday. Ernie Els didn’t lose here; Phil Mickelson won and he did so with style and cool and character. Somehow, the man looked his demon in the eye and smiled.

I don’t know about you, but I liked that a lot.

Don Allen's Out of Bounds celebrated its 16th anniversary with The Times in September. Proof that you can fool some of the people all of the time. Catch his daily Out of Bounds radio show at 9 a.m. Monday through Friday, on KVOI-AM. E-mail him at timesedit@timesofacadiana.com.
Frank Randol, owner of Randol's restaurant and the crawfish processing plant next door, visits with some of his critters recently.

When the going gets tough, the tough of’ Cajun crawfish industry just keeps on going.

By Jeremy J. Alford

Don’t tell Frank Randol that Louisiana’s crawfish industry is in turmoil. He’ll likely grab you by the shirt collar and drag you across the floor of his processing plant in Lafayette, where production has doubled over the past year. As secretary of the Crawfish Processors Alliance, the driving force behind recent tariff battles, Randol would add insult to injury by launching into a lecture on how the fishery has brought itself back from the brink of devastation with smart management and diversification.

“We are retooling, reinventing, investing in inventory,” Randol says from his restaurant on Kaliste Saloom Road, an Acadiana mainstay that opens its bandstand to live Cajun music on a regular basis and acts as a built-in feed-
er business for his family’s processing plant. “We’re selling very well this year and expect to close out with one of the best years ever.”

Meanwhile, via a trip down the Evangeline Thruway, you’ll find a less optimistic view from Dr. Jay Huner, director of the Crawfish Research Station in Cade, affiliated with the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

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Editor’s Note: Deciphering the current state of Louisiana’s crawfish industry depends on whom you ask. Imports continue to hammer the market, but in lesser amounts than ever, and legal battles are redefining the fishery’s economic landscape. Processors are experiencing a rebirth of sorts, yet producers claim to be struggling. Most insiders agree it’s too late to turn back the clock on the glory days of this bayou staple, but researchers contend there are positive factors to build on — if public and private interests will get more involved.

As such, Louisiana consumers and those in the industry seem unwilling to let their crustacean dreams sink in the basin.
Spencer Thibodeaux harvests crawfish at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette-owned ponds in Cade.

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Huner says he believes the industry is somewhat of a mess as it stands today. To justify his statement, Huner points to approximately 40,000 pounds of crawfish his outfit harvests annually as a test model.

'As far as I'm concerned, the industry is in a state of limbo. Basically, I just don't know what the future holds for the industry.'—Dr. Jay Huner, director of the Crawfish Research Station in Cade

In 2001, the total crop netted the research station $46,000. The following year garnered about $34,000. But the last two years have been difficult, bringing in only $25,000 each. 'As far as I'm concerned, the industry is in a state of limbo,' Huner says. 'Basically, I just don't know what the future holds for the industry.'

The ongoing battle against cheap Chinese imports has been well documented, with the imports damaging the industry to the point of losing dozens of processors around the state over the past 10 years. Although this sector of the industry is benefiting from an influx of tariff payments from foreign competitors, the allocations have yet to recoup what they lost in capital during the '90s.

Exorbitant prices for fuel and bait are also creating an unfriendly environment for producers, who are still reeling from the impact of harmful pesticides and recent changes in mesh sizes by the state Legislature. Furthermore, emergency federal assistance for losses caused by natural disasters and other factors has been virtually nonexistent. But there is good news:

• Consumer demand remains high.
• Processors are assessing themselves with required annual payments to keep the tariffs going, and using current payoffs to reinvest in their businesses.
• There are also two new processing plants opening up in the state, debunking the theory, at least for now, that the market can't sustain more plants.
• A healthy settlement has been reached in a lawsuit involving fishermen and companies selling harmful pesticides.
• State officials are vowing to continue their commitment to the cause, which began a few years back when processors were attempting to have a tariff placed on Chinese imports.
• The buyers' market receives crawfish from two different sources. One industry provides pond crawfish harvested by farmers and the other industry provides wild crawfish from the Atchafalaya Basin. The latter normally monopolizes the market following Lent, while pond crawfish enter and dominate the market during the early months of the year.

There's a sort of chemistry to a productive crawfish season: First, a dry summer is required to pull water into main arteries. This forces crawfish to seek higher ground and reproduction increases. Then, a wet fall and mild winter followed by a warm spring will create ideal growth conditions. As such, there's only so much a farmer or fisherman can do when dealing with elements created by Mother Nature.

For now, the elements are cooperating, says Bob Odom, secretary of the state Department of Agriculture. "The industry is in pretty good shape right now, and live crawfish are bringing in great prices," Odom says. "The peel meat is getting 40 to 50 cents a pound, which means a decent market for tail meat. And judging from the live market, we got a good supply of crawfish all around."

Robert Romaire, resident director of the Louisiana State University Aquaculture Research Station, says he believes in light of recent problems, the industry is moving along in a positive manner. Farming acres have increased by 25 percent over the past two years, more fishermen are

Each season's length is dependent upon a number of scenarios, including weather. The average yield in a Louisiana crawfish season, since 1993, is about 73 million pounds. There are roughly 110,000 acres of ponds spanning 13 south Louisiana parishes that are used for crawfish farming.

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The State of the Industry

In essence, a crawfish season runs about 12 months over two consecutive years, but farmers only harvest for seven to nine months. In past years, a shortage in the overall harvest led to higher prices for consumers, but that trend has tapered off over the past four seasons.
Beginning of the End

Whether they're embroidered on a mesh camouflage baseball cap, dropped on crinkled newspaper or boiled in a spicy étouffée, nothing else symbolizes the Cajun culture like crawfish.

In recent years, though, the journey from basin to crawfish net to processing plant has been a difficult one, especially for processors. Live crawfish prices have skyrocketed because of a number of factors, including wider use of pesticides, persistent drought conditions and unpredictable mudbug mating patterns.

But the biggest impact on the market arrived in the form of an influx of Chinese crawfish tails in the early '90s. The cheaper product managed to severely undercut domestic prices and endanger the state's crawfish industry. Processors were dropping like flies, and fishermen had nowhere to bring their catch. In 1997, due in part to aggressive actions by Louisiana processors, the U.S. Commerce Department levied imported crawfish with duties of up to 201 percent. The reasoning behind the decision was that Chinese crawfish were selling far below fair market value. Louisiana processors are also entitled to a share of the money collected.

"It allowed the industry that is being hurt to get back on its feet. We now have the capital to invest in our business and get our business back. We were basically able to catch the Chinese cheating and we want to make sure they can't re-enter the market cheating again."

In 2000, alone, Chinese imports were tallied at $121 million, triple the amount seen three years earlier. It had a devastating impact on the market, and insiders vow to never let it happen again.

Over the past 10 years, you could track the progress of the industry and see exactly where the bottom dropped out.

In 1993, 123.4 million pounds were harvested for a value of $54.6 million, according to summaries compiled by the LSU Ag Center. That dwarfs the totals of 2003, when farmers and fishermen harvested 83.1 million pounds at a value of $52.8 million.

The comparison may seem lopsided, but consider the numbers gleaned from the 2000 season, when imports were at their highest. About 18.4 million pounds were harvested at a value of $31.6 million.

The number of producers had also dwindled...
from 3,120 the year prior to 1,873 in 2000. The most recent numbers available indicate there are more than 2,200 producers harvesting crawfish today. It’s no wonder many in the industry view current trends as positive, especially when compared to the mid '90s.

Some industry leaders argue rebirth begins with Louisiana processors, who have been able to jumpstart their businesses with tariff payments. But others contend the tariffs have done very little.

"At this point, I don’t see any change," Huner says. "OK, we’ve had tariffs for six years. What good did that do us? The tariff has been renewed now, and I still see Chinese crawfish meat at prices my processors can’t compete with."

That may be true, but a few processors are prepared for the ongoing battle.

### Process or Perish

The number of processors over the past decade has dipped dramatically, numbering in the hundreds during the early '90s then falling to about 30 today. The 1996 anti-dumping petition yielded minimal amounts of money last year for these processors and it was nowhere near what the industry has actually lost monetarily over the past 10 years.

Although an argument can be made that the marketplace, while on the rebound, cannot sustain more processors, there is a move afoot to open new establishments. David Gilbeau, administrator of the commercial seafood program at the Department of Health and Hospitals, says there have been two new applications that were approved for facilities in Port Barre and Iowa, near Lake Charles.

"This is the first time we’ve seen any kind of turnaround," Gilbeau says. "It’s been up to eight years since a new application has come through here."

Romaire says the new processors would be at a disadvantage because they can’t claim a share of the tariff payments. Additionally, if they want to survive in a rocky marketplace, they will have to diversify, he says.

Randol says he recognized this in the late '70s and folded crabs into his processing. He also launched a catering business and a restaurant.

"Right now, my biggest obstacle is meeting demand," Randol says. "Now all I have to do is process. I don’t mind taking a risk. I’m taking money out of the bank and putting it into my business."

Investing in his inventory has also allowed Randol to keep tail meat in his freezers for year-round consumption, a challenge for most processors.

Huner describes the peeling crawfish industry as a “salvage operation,” adding that only the largest producers who are able to hold low-cost inventory into the fall and winter can reap reasonable prices. Most others find themselves struggling during the off-season.

Labor has likewise traditionally been a problem for processors because most locals just don’t want the jobs. But the process is becoming easier. Like Randol, Gabe LeBlanc, owner of the Acadiana Fisherman’s Cooperative in Henderson, has found short-term Mexican labor to help fulfill his processing needs.

LeBlanc also says his outfit has been able to survive because they simply stuck it out during the hard times and branched out into other areas.

"I guess, basically, being that there are less processors, there’s less competition," LeBlanc says. "Some other processors got diversified, too, and we got into alligators ourselves."

The cooperative also handles processing for other businesses in their building.

Odom cheers these strategies but says tariffs must continue to be enforced if the industry is to stay afloat. The Crawfish Processors Alliance agrees, and they have put up more than $1 million of their own money to keep the tariffs going. Each processor receiving a portion of the tariff also earmarks up to 40 percent of what they receive for a special fund.

Huner says this might be a good idea if the “politicians” would effectively enforce the tariff, alluding to the fact that only a small portion — about 10 percent — of the total tariffs are being collected. So as to whether the tariffs have played a positive role, Huner says he doubts it: "The politicians have done a good job of bamboozling the public," he says.

### Legal Lagniappe

The legal battle over tariffs is mostly behind the industry now, but an unrelated lawsuit over harmful pesticides is just drawing to a close. Bayer CropScience USA and other Louisiana companies that sold the pesticide Icon were sued five years ago by farmers who claim the chemicals destroyed their crops in 2000 and 2001.

The settlement etched out by the involved parties would pay the fishermen $45 million for their losses.

The fishermen say the pesticide was used on rice, but it harmed crawfish crops as well. It’s a major victory for the industry, and a fairness hearing to discuss the settlement is scheduled for early May.

So, are there any major legal battles now pending for Louisiana’s crawfish industry? "I think we will continue to battle with the tariff thing because we have to go back and get it renewed," Odom says. "As long as we can compete equally, our industry will do fine."

Romaire and Huner, who served as an expert witness for the plaintiff in the Icon suit, foresee a few pending legal battles on the horizon:

- Water for farmers: Who gets it and how much?
- Issues of access: For instance, if water in the Basin rises above private land, is it still open to crawfish farmers? Huner says this decision would likely be decided by the state Supreme Court.
- Complications over farmers and fishermen obtaining federal aid disaster funds could also likely become more of an issue, Romaire says.
Li' Help, Please

Obtaining federal aid for crawfish producers has always been a sore spot. Most recently, federal agriculture officials denied a petition in January that would have allowed Louisiana crawfish farmers to receive technical and financial support for losses during the 2002 season.

The Trade Adjustment Assistance for Farmers program, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, has no appeal process, but crawfish farmers can make another push during the upcoming round for any losses incurred during the 2003 season.

To receive the federal cash and business assistance, the farmers had to prove that imported crawfish supplies increased during the 2002 season, causing domestic prices to drop by more than 20 percent.

Researchers actually found that imports decreased during this period and had no impact whatsoever on Louisiana prices. Still, some farmers and processors claim to have a difficult time running their businesses.

On the state level, some in the industry question if elected officials are doing all they can. While professional sports teams and cable networks receive hundreds of millions of dollars annually in assistance, other economic development engines, such as processing, seem to fall by the wayside.

"Look at the number of crawfish farmers, which are in excess of 1,200 producers," Romaire says. "Then look at all the ancillary industries. There are at least three part-time jobs for every producer, including bait sellers, brokers, retailers and so on."

Hunet concurs. "I think the state is ignoring the whole seafood industry all together," he says.

Odom rejects these opinions. "I think the state has done quite a bit," Odom says, outlining initiatives such as paying for the initial push to impose tariffs on imported crawfish. "I'm of the opinion the state has put up good money to keep the industry strong."

Even though Louisiana is at the peak of its crawfish season, you wouldn't be able judge as such looking at the bills filed for the ongoing regular legislative session. There are only a small handful of measures dealing with crawfish. One would increase the representation of wild crawfish interests on an industry board, while another calls for more structured farming on the state level.

Additionally, unlike other commercial seafood fisheries, there are no laws that establish set seasons for crawfish or strict penalties for reporting catch and sales figures. Researchers argue that many in the industry don't want government poking around what has traditionally been a cash-heavy business.

"There are many people who would feel uncomfortable with a great amount of attention," Romaire says.

Emerging from the Depths

Most of the people interviewed for this story say they believe the industry can continue its rebound if it focuses on cultivating outside markets and investing more in research and technology.

Researchers contend they are close to sustaining the life of crawfish for longer periods of time, which could open up a variety of new markets.

"There are lobsters in every major supermarket in the country," Hunet says. "We could have crawfish in most of those supermarkets, at least seasonally, and provide consumers with three pounds of steamed crawfish for the $9 to $10 they spend for a one-pound lobster."

As for research and technology, two of the biggest hurdles seem to be raising money and finding qualified people. For one reason or another, shrimp and finfish seem to get more attention than crawfish on the federal level. It may have something to do with the industry being primarily contained in Louisiana, but there is a desperate need for funds, researchers argue.

Although it's simple enough to receive money for water quality research, funds for developing an efficient peeling machine have been scarce.

"Even though machines have been developed, nothing has come to fruition," Romaire says. "I don't know if it's a 'Holy Grail' by any stretch of the imagination, but as a biologist, I see lots of crawfish going unharvested each year because of a lack of a market."

An efficient peeling machine would likely be embraced with open arms, but according to a related LSU study, processors estimate it would cost more than $5,000 to alter their current facilities to introduce a crawfish peeling machine, an almost extravagant expense for an industry in turmoil.

There is also some potential in putting crawfish byproducts to good use.

"We can run crawfish through meat-bone separators and create edible mince and pastes for food products and pet and animal feed products that can be profitable," Hunet says. "What would have happened if the million or so of public moneys spent to enact the tariff and continue it were spent on market and product development?"

But even if there were funds for special experiments, there is concern over who would conduct them. According to Romaire, there are only three doctorates specializing in crawfish research in Louisiana. Furthermore, there are no special biology curricula for mudbugs established at the state's universities.

"There has not been a push in that area," Romaire says. "From the standpoint of a scientist at LSU, it has been somewhat disappointing for me and for people that would have an interest."

Adhering to this strategy of enhancing research and technology and exploring new markets may be the only way to keep the momentum rolling, but it should be done with caution, Odom says.

"I think research and technology keeps us in business," Odom says. "We got a pretty good reputation in the marketplace and we need to support this for future growth."

Jeremy Alford is a freelance writer living in Baton Rouge. To comment on this article, e-mail times Totheadtimesofacadiana.com.
EVEN GOOD-TIME REX MOROUX GETS THE BLUES.
BY NICK PITTMAN

round the peak and fizzle of Y2K fears, Rex Moroux dreamt he sang and strummed a guitar to Hank Williams’ “Lost Highway” and all the girls dug it. As soon as he could, he picked up a pawn shop piece and a friend taught him the song. Nearly five years later, he sings and writes songs that would make the original Cowboy Crooner tear up and the girls? Sitting at Tsunami during a “recent” Friday lunch, it seemed every young thing who passed by loaned him a smile: and a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Thankfully, it was three chords," Moroux says of the song that lead him to the stage. By his looks alone, Moroux is hard to finger as the creator of 105 & A Lullaby, a new disc chock-full of perpetually heart-broken country and honky-tonk tunes. There’s the hair: brushy, tight curls. There’s the face: scruffy. There’s the shoes: well-worn, old-school Reeboks. There’s the menu: sushi, which is an exception to his normal diet. (“I can’t eat anything fun.”) There’s the vernacular: well-read and well-traveled city boy. But the songs — some so heart-broken that you’d swear he grew up somewhere that isn’t known for having a good time — pushes aside his image snags.

“I love sad songs; I’m a sucker for them, all my life. Some of my favorite songs are sad songs. I’ve had I guess I’ve had my share of bulls— it happen to me in my life,” Moroux confesses. “Music is a real emotional art form. If you are really, really feeling strongly on it, often that emotion is sad or is longing. Those feelings really kind of put the pen to paper for me (rather) than, say, a happy moment. I’m a happy guy and I have a very fun life, but sometimes I am not... I guess when you are at your most vulnerable, creatively you are at your best.”

Last year, Moroux — and his band The Johns, a plural reference to the only constant member Cavan Carruth — recorded his demo Peggy Sue Is Punk Rock (an irrelevant reference to the Buddy Holly classic) at Ivan Klisanin’s in Lafayette. Mention of the disc’s name tends to lead Moroux into a twangy rendition of the song’s dwang, dwang, dwangs. The new album takes its name from a less-than-conspicuous source. The last song, “105 & A Lullaby,” is typical Moroux weeper, relating how it feels to make only $105 a week. As he says, “I love the idea that the only time you don’t feel broke is when you’re sleeping.”

Although it only took a total of eight early-fall days to record, mixing it and other loose ends pushed the release four months past what Moroux hoped would be an pre-2004 drop date. He originally picked a studio in Austin for a summer recording session, but thanks to connections and a deal he couldn’t pass up, Moroux & The Johns laid down the tracks in Nashville. “We were hooked up with a deal, so if you don’t really pay for it you can’t bitch about it.”

Moroux’s have-talent, get-female-attention plan started in high school, where he fronted cover bands mainly to land chicks. The gimmick would eventually be shelved and buried. Later, graduation

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