

Orange County Register
Thursday, March 15, 2007

Men of distinction

RANDY YOUNGMAN
Register columnist
ryoungman@ocregister.com

Golf is a sport that, joints and muscles willing, we can play for the rest of our lives, even after we retire and have trouble getting out of the bed in the morning.

That's why the Champions Tour is successful – and why it is necessary.

And spending a few days at Newport Beach Country Club following and interviewing the Champions tour pros during Toshiba Classic week merely reminded me and reinforced why I prefer the senior tour over the PGA Tour these days.

A lot of golf purists and snobs scoff at the Champions Tour, which was launched for 50-and-over pros in 1980, but I think it's great for golf.

Granted, I'm also on the back nine of life – how's that for a euphemism for AARP-eligible half-centurions? – so perhaps I relate better to my contemporaries. But that isn't the primary reason I enjoy watching the Champions Tour.

It isn't merely the name recognition, either, or that the senior tour showcases, as tour rookie Mark O'Meara called it, "a Who's Who" list of prominent pros.

The truth is, I didn't start following professional golf closely until the early 1990s. So when Jack Nicklaus won the Masters in 1986, at age 46, I wasn't overly impressed that he had just captured his 18th major. But I am now, because I have learned to appreciate the history of the sport.

And just because most of the seniors don't strike the ball as well or get up and down as often as they once did – Jay Haas, Fred Funk and Hale Irwin are notable exceptions to that rule – doesn't mean they're not worth watching. To the contrary.

Why do you think the Rolling Stones, the Eagles and other rock bands are still immensely popular? It isn't because they sound better than they did in their prime.

As Champions pro Fuzzy Zoeller, the 1979 Masters champion and 1984 U.S. Open champion, pointed out in an interview last week, many of the seniors have distinctive swings that are as recognizable as their names.

"Out here, you can recognize somebody's swing from two fairways over," said Zoeller, 55. "A lot of the players on this tour are self-taught, so you can put the faces with the swings."

The swings and follow-throughs are so unique that Peter Jacobsen, another relative newcomer on the Champions Tour, likes to entertain the galleries by imitating the swings of Arnold Palmer, Lee Trevino, Chi Chi Rodriguez, Nicklaus and even Craig "The Walrus" Stadler – the latter only after Jake fills his shirt with several dozen golf balls to approximate Stadler's considerable girth.

And I always get a kick out of watching Allen Doyle's short backswing, a la Doug Sanders, if you're old enough to remember him.

Doyle was a college hockey player who practiced his golf swing in a basement with a low ceiling. That's how his swing evolved. (I wish I had a similar excuse.)

"I don't have a swing guru," Doyle told me a few years ago. "I often joke that if (famed swing coach David) Leadbetter were at the end of the range . . . to see who he might want to work with, I'd be the last one picked."

And that's the beauty of senior golf. Weekend hackers and duffers can relate better to players who swing like Doyle, Dana Quigley, Chi Chi and Arnie.

In sharp contrast, most current PGA Tour players have swing coaches and similar, cookie-cutter moves through impact.

But, remember, it doesn't matter how you get there – it's how many. There are no pictures on the scorecards.

From a personal and professional perspective, Champions Tour players also are more accessible and more colorful than many PGA Tour stars. I enjoy watching Tiger Woods tee it up every time he decides to play, which isn't often these days, but good luck getting him to sit down for an interview.

I've had one 20-minute one-on-one interview with Woods, which I enjoyed immensely, but it took place only because one of his PR representatives came to me and asked if I'd like to talk to him.

This past week, I had several informal and informative one-on-one chats with Champions pros. It was fun talking to O'Meara about his Orange County roots, to Ben Crenshaw about the loft on putters, to Scott Hoch about his 30 career holes-in-one – think about that one – and to Jay Haas and Loren Roberts about their friendly rivalry and the state of their games.

They couldn't have been friendlier or more accommodating, which in my business was a refreshing change.

I also got to watch a lot of superb shot-making from up close, especially by Haas, the eventual Toshiba champion in a record-breaking 19-under par.

Never mind that Newport Beach Country Club is a relatively short course, by tour standards. You still have to hit the shots, and I saw Haas hit five approach shots inside 2 feet en route to tap-in birdies. He nearly aced the par-3, 143-yard fourth hole twice, despite tucked pins. And he got up and down from everywhere – from bunkers, from sand-filled divots and from behind trees.

As Zoeller said, "It's fun to come to golf courses like this. After all, spectators want to see birdies. That's what this tour was designed around – birdies."

And that's what the spectators, a total of nearly 80,000 for the week, got to see.

They also got to see Haas at his best, at age 53. He had 20 birdies and one bogey and shot 65-64-65 to break Irwin's 2002 tournament record by two shots. This time, I was very impressed.

"Golf is golf, if you play well," a humble Haas told me in a private moment. "There's no defense out here. It's not like you have to return a serve of a 19-year-old college kid – or have to try to catch one of Tiger's drives coming off the tee or something like that.

"The course is there. If you play well, a good shot is a good shot; I don't care who hits it or what age you are."

That's the beauty of the Champions Tour, which moves to Valencia Country Club this weekend for the AT&T Classic. I'll be TiVo-ing, so I can watch all the distinctive swings between NCAA Tournament and Ducks games.

Contact the writer: 714-796-5051 ext. 1026 orryoungman@ocregister.com

http://www.ocregister.com/ocregister/sports/golf/abox/article_1619604.php