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## Difficult shot: playing on Tour

Former CU star Tolan faces obstacles trying to fulfill his PGA dream, while Golden native Olson is in a battle to retain his card.

By Anthony Cotton  
*The Denver Post*

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Derek Tolan, who recently finished his college career, enjoys running with the bigger dogs in the professional ranks. (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post)

When Derek Tolan won a Rolex watch in New Mexico in June as part of the haul from his first

professional victory, he considered auctioning off the \$7,500 timepiece in order to secure some much-needed coin for his nascent golf career.

Contrast that to Leif Olson. After the Golden native won a BMW roadster, making an improbable, bank-shot hole-in-one recently at the Canadian Open, he said he would probably give the \$50,000 car to his sister.

At this point, Olson's not exactly rolling in dough. In his first season on the PGA Tour, Olson finished tied for 36th in Canada, his best outing in a year in which he has made the weekend cut in just four of 14 starts. His check for \$24,544 brought his season's earnings to just over \$44,000

### Leif Olson hole-in-one

**Watch** Golden native Leif Olson and the improbable hole-in-one that netted him a \$50,000 car.

— or \$6,000 more than Tolan made for winning in New Mexico and last week's Colorado Open.

"If you have a good week out here, you make a lot of money; I'm assuming I'm going to be fine and doing my own thing," Olson said in a telephone conversation from Flint, Mich., where he was preparing for this week's stop, the Buick Open. "In a worst-case scenario, if I was struggling, I'd probably take the cash, but I'm assuming that's not going to happen.

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"I'm assuming I'll be fine. In a month or two, if that's not the case, I'll revisit it."

Maybe baby sis shouldn't think about pimping her ride just yet, just as Tolan may want to keep eBay in mind when firing up his computer. It's nothing personal — just the nature of golf. Tolan and Olson are in the midst of navigating some highly treacherous waters, trying to land their crafts on the golden, treasure-laden beach that is success at the highest level of the game.

The difference lies in how far they are from the shore — from where Tolan's dinghy currently resides, The Show is really but a speck on the horizon and his ship, depending on the tide, may not come in for some time.

Olson has a slight toehold on the sand, almost close enough to disembark. But

#### Extras

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- [View a gallery of photos from the 2009 Colorado Open .](#)

he too is subject to the vagaries of the game.

"I don't even know. I haven't looked that far ahead," Olson said of his prospects should he not retain his tour card this year. "I'm just trying to stay with the thought that it's going to happen, and if it doesn't, at that point I'll figure it out."

Given what the 28-year-old Olson had been through, the roundabout path he has taken en route to the PGA Tour, it would hard to bet against him. After graduating from Duke, Olson took three years off from the game while pursuing careers in finance and medicine.

Olson decided to give himself a goal of making it onto the tour in two years — somehow, he beat the odds and survived all three grueling stages of qualifying school last fall to earn his card.

#### Tolan mentally tough

Tolan, 23, hopes his tale has a similarly happy ending. He famously made his initial splash by qualifying for the 2002 U.S. Open before he had graduated from high school. That gave him a taste for the life he felt destined for, even through a collegiate career at the University of Colorado that may not have lived up to everyone's expectations.

"I always knew, and it's not making an excuse for what I did in college, but I always knew I'd be a better player in the pros," Tolan said. "Some guys can adapt and do well there, but I knew it wasn't a true reflection of what I was capable of."

"I didn't whine about it. I just told myself that whatever I did there, it would make me stronger and tougher out here. And that's been the case. . . I enjoy playing with these guys a lot more than I did college kids — a lot more."

Part of the reason for that may be because, when it come to golf, Tolan is an old soul. His

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father, John, a golf instructor, recalls a very young Derek always wanting to hang in the golf shop or out on the course with him and his buddies.

"I always had to grind, and maybe I didn't know it at the time, but that mentality got me to where I am now," he said. "A lot of other guys, they never had to do that. When they play, they're playing with their buddies and slapping it around — they don't understand that they're falling behind the guys who are out there grinding. So when they get into a tournament, they're out of their element, because they never had to play against that kind of competition."

## Money could end dream

But all the preparation in the world doesn't guarantee that a gust of wind won't push a seemingly perfect approach shot into the drink, or that a smooth rolling putt won't lip out of the hole. Or, for that matter, that you'll have enough money to pay the entry fees necessary to get into the tournaments you need to play in to eventually make it.

The truth is, unless you're a Tiger Woods, almost every budding pro faces a financial dilemma. Oftentimes, that, and not the purity of the player's swing, is what ends the dream.

"There are some people who he's played with through the years who have said, 'Hey, Derek, when you get there, come see me and I'll help you out,'" John Tolan said. "And some might, but they add — 'But . . . in five years I want all my

money back.' We're trying to avoid that situation."

After the third round of the Colorado Open, a spectator mentioned to Derek Tolan that a friend had recently played under the watchful eye of Donald Trump at the U.S. Girls Junior Amateur and that the Donald promised to follow her career.

And while Tolan immediately asked if he could get the same consideration, particularly when it came to money, he says there's a part of him that perhaps wouldn't accept Trump's largesse.

"I got a little help from some friends, but basically I put the ball in my court — if you don't make money, then you've got to figure it out somehow," Tolan said.

## Keeping the card

Olson's pressure these days is of a different sort. His exempt status allows him to get into almost any tournament that's not a major or small-field invitational, like the World Golf Championship events.

But even with a slate of about 21 events, he still needs to make enough money to retain his card. The top 125 players on the money list each year are exempt the following season. In 2008, the 125th player, former Colorado State star Martin Laird made \$852,752.

Olson said he's playing very well in his practice rounds but hasn't taken it onto the course. In his

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14 events entering the Buick, his average first-round score is 74.6. By contrast, his second-round norm drops to 71.3. He shot a 68 on Thursday to open the Buick.

"I'm always having to fight my way back," he said.

To that end, unlike many players new to the tour, who find themselves struggling to figure out where to eat or where to stay at each stop of the 10-month marathon that is a PGA Tour season, Olson finds himself seeking advice from his peers on how they practice.

"I was out of golf for so long, and getting back into competition, especially on the PGA Tour is just so very different. You start thinking a lot, you're nervous — you just have find a way to relax and play well," Olson said. "A lot of it is mental, learning how to do what you're doing when you're practicing, out into competition."

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## Dates to remember

*In their efforts to get on — or stay on — the PGA Tour, there are certain dates of great importance to Derek Tolan and Leif Olson. Here are a few, and the implications they hold for local golfers:*

**Aug. 6-9:** Wichita Open. The first of three Nationwide Tour events for which Tolan will likely try to qualify; other possibilities include stops in Overland Park, Kan., Aug. 20-23, and

Sandy, Utah, Sept. 10-13.

**Sept. 15-25:** PGA Tour Q-school prequalifying. A new wrinkle in the process of making it to the tour. Players have to get through a four-day event just to get to the three-stage qualifier.

**Oct. 1-Nov. 15:** The PGA Tour's Fall Series. Most of the big-name players are done for the year, but the money still counts the same in the series' five events.

**Dec. 2-7:** The final stage of Q-school, held at Bear Lakes Country Club in West Palm Beach, Fla. Approximately 160 players will compete over six rounds, with the top 25 gaining PGA Tour cards.

Anthony Cotton, *The Denver Post*

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