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colorado classics

Hale Irwin still in the swing of things

By Irv Moss
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Irwin joined the Senior PGA Tour in 1995. (Michael Cohen, Getty Images file photo)

Hale Irwin has shown a special inner fire in carving out an amazing career in golf, going from a relative unknown to the top of his profession. Call it talent, determination, work ethic maybe all of them combined. Just don't call it luck.

Irwin, 64, starred in football and golf at the University of Colorado, but it's his performance in golf that earned him worldwide acclaim.

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He's back this week to play in the Senior PGA Championship at the Colorado Golf Club in Parker.

"It's special for me to play in Colorado," Irwin said in a telephone interview from Phoenix before arriving for practice rounds over the weekend. He came in early, he said, to familiarize himself with the course, which is hosting its first major championship event.

"The biggest reason was to look at the golf course," Irwin said. "I also was able to see some faces I haven't seen for a while."

Even with three U.S. Open titles, 20 PGA Tour victories and five appearances on the U.S. Ryder Cup team, Irwin remembers he once had to show he belonged on the pro tour.

"I never was able to play in a national amateur tournament because I was involved in football," Irwin said. "I won the NCAA golf championship in 1967, but was unknown in golf otherwise."

That's why Irwin will never forget his first professional win, in a small tournament in South Carolina in 1971.

"The NCAA championship was the catalyst for me turning pro," he recalled. "But of all the wins out there, I still go back to that first victory. I sank a 12-inch putt on the final hole and I finally had done something I had set out to do."

The victory gave him membership in what seemed like an exclusive club. Three years later, he won the U.S. Open at Winged Foot. In 1979, he won another U.S. Open title, beating Jerry Pate and Gary Player by two strokes.

Of his first U.S. Open victory, Irwin said, "That proved I could play on the world stage."

Golf fans probably



Hale Irwin won the 1967 NCAA championship as a golfer at the University of Colorado, where he also was a defensive back. (File photo)

most remember his third U.S. Open title, 11 years after his second. Irwin put on a late rush, including a 45-foot birdie putt on the 72nd hole that helped get him to a playoff with Mike McDonald in the 1990 Open. He birdied the first playoff hole to win.

In 1995, Irwin joined the Senior PGA Tour, now

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the Champions Tour, and is the tour's all-time leader with 45 wins.

Irwin's football career began almost by accident. His family moved to Boulder when he was in junior high school.

"I wasn't going to play football," Irwin said. "I went to practice one day to watch some friends and decided to go out."

He played quarterback at Boulder High School and was an all-conference safety for the CU Buffs.

But golf was always on his mind.

"I don't regret it one bit that I went into golf," Irwin said. "There's nothing else I could have done in my life that could have afforded me the ability to meet people throughout the world. Forget about the money. I've considered two former U.S. presidents (Gerald Ford and George Walker Bush) as close friends. It has been an unbelievable experience."

Irwin developed his work ethic through construction work as a youth. He still has the fire to win. He has no thoughts of putting the clubs in the closet.

"I wouldn't still be playing a full schedule if I had thoughts of quitting," he said.

Hale Irwin bio

Born: June 3, 1945, in Joplin, Mo.

High school: Boulder High.

College: Colorado.

Family: Wife Sally, daughter Becky, son Steve.

Hobby: Photography, because he looks at it as a form of art.

Ambition: At some point in the future, traveling and leaving the golf clubs at home.

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