



Another Irwin will tee off at U.S. Open

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Steve Irwin didn't have the luxury. He had a long putt to make on the 18th green at Oakmont County Club in Glendale, Calif., if he was to avoid a playoff.

When that putt rolled in, when he made par and completed a 36-hole score of 138 to avoid the traffic jam, he was too busy exhaling to think about the ramifications.

"I made that putt and ... I mean, you talk about relief; that was fun," Irwin said.

At that moment, relief was spelled U.S. Open. At that moment, Steve Irwin no longer was walking in his famous dad's footsteps, he was leaving his own prints. For an amateur golfer, nothing is more profound than qualifying for your country's national open championship. For the son of a man with three U.S. Open titles among 87 professional wins, a man Golf Digest ranked as the 19th greatest player of all time, nothing less than winning the U.S. Open could be more surreal.

"It really hasn't sunk in," Irwin said. "You know, as a golfer, it's always one of those dreams you have, you talk about someday making it to the U.S. Open. And now that it's here, it's kind of like, 'Oh my God, what have I done?'"

The simple answer is, Irwin has done something he has wanted to do his whole life. If you haven't put the two together, Steve Irwin is the son of Hale Irwin. Hale Irwin climbed this Mount Everest of a golf tournament in 1974, 1979 and 1990, one of just six players to win three or more U.S. Opens.

"As his son, to be able to play in it, is honestly something that ... I really couldn't ask for any better," Steve Irwin, 36, said. "I'm just thrilled; words don't even describe it. It's so exciting, because it is a major and because it is our national championship, but also because of the family history. It's meant so much to us over the course of time."

PROUD FATHER

In that same context, Steve Irwin's tee time Thursday at Congressional County Club in Bethesda, Md., means every bit as much to his father. The senior Irwin always has been sensitive to the shadow in which Steve has had to play golf. But U.S. Open qualifying doesn't pay attention to names, only scores. There are no penalties for family lineage, no mulligans either.

"I'm very proud of what he's done thus far," said Hale Irwin, who now is based in Phoenix but maintains a residence in St. Louis. "Whether he had made it or not, I'm still proud of him. But the fact that now he has something he can hang his hat on ... it wasn't a father-son tournament, it wasn't anything like that.

"He's now competing on the national scale in what arguably has been the biggest tournament in my career. I played in the U.S. Open as an amateur 45 years ago, so it's good to have an Irwin back in the lineup as an amateur."

During some of the biggest moments of his father's career, Steve Irwin grew up in St. Louis and graduated from Country Day School. On a generic level, Steve always has been a fine amateur player. He competed in local events throughout his St. Louis summers, occasionally with his major-championship winning dad on the bag. After high school, he played golf at the University of Colorado, where his dad had excelled in football and golf.

When he finished school, Steve Irwin tested the professional waters, spending more than two years splashing about the mini-tour circuits. Like so many other skilled players, he never could quite hit that next fairway. Instead, he settled into the family golf business, found a comfortable life in Colorado and got his amateur status back in 2001.

"After 21/2 years or so of beating my head against the wall as a professional, I figured there had to be an easier way to earn a living," Steve Irwin said, with a laugh. "The first thing to start with was to get my amateur status back and get back to having fun again on the golf course."

Steve Irwin has become a quintessential amateur, the kind upon which the game was founded. He is president of Hale Irwin Golf Services and has a number of other business ventures in his portfolio. Along with his wife, Jessi, he has a 22-month-old daughter to keep him occupied. He is a family man, a working stiff and a golf enthusiast in that order.

He has won state amateur titles and is a past Colorado Golf Association player of the year. To be sure, good ol' pops has been a tough act to follow. In golf circles, Steve Irwin always will be identified most readily as Hale Irwin's son. But if you think that's an issue, think again.

"my ultimate goal"

"Honestly, that's perfectly fine with me," said Steve Irwin, who is paired with pros Ryan Nelson and Elliot Gealy on Thursday. "I'm very proud of dad and very proud of our family history, and the U.S. Open is what truly defined his career. It's been my ultimate goal in golf since I began competing, really.

"I don't care if you're a 30-handicapper or a touring pro, playing in our national championship is the ultimate dream. It's been a lot of hard work and some heartbreak along the way, but I'm really excited about it. It's an event that has meant so much over the course of time."

Steve did not get the pleasure of breaking the news to his dad. In these social networking times, there's no such thing as a scoop. An excited friend, following the sectional qualifying results on line, already had alerted Hale Irwin to what Steve was doing. Nonetheless, the phone conversation between two generations of U.S. Open competitors was special.

"We definitely shared a fun moment," Steve said.

Fortunately for Hale, Steve didn't ask him to be his caddy, instead selecting his wife for the job. Famous for the 1964 U.S. Open in which champion Ken Venturi battled heatstroke and exhaustion, hilly Congressional is no picnic to walk.

"The thought (about caddying) crossed my mind," Hale Irwin acknowledged. "And I thought, 'Now wait a minute here. You're 66 years old ... you haven't carried a bag in I don't know how long, except from the garage to the house ... it could be anywhere from 90 to 100 degrees with high humidity, walking up and down these hills ... you know, maybe I'll let someone else do that. ...I have to play next week and I don't think my body would recover for a month after that.'"

Anyone who has been around Hale Irwin, or chronicled his career, knows he does not suffer distractions well. Competitive nature and steely tenacity have been hallmarks of his career.

So it is not surprising to hear Hale Irwin suggest he might be most valuable to Steve by staying out of the way this week.

"I think, I told my wife, Sally, when I heard Steven qualified, 'I have some reservations about this,'" he explained. "I want this to be his show. Certainly, I want to be there to see him play, I can't wait. But unless invited, I don't want to be a distraction to him because this is something he did on his own, 100 percent his effort.

"You know, I've been there and I've done that. I don't want that to jeopardize his enjoyment of this championship. Fortunately, we were asked to go, so we are going as a support group and that's where I'll be."

GETTING GOING

An Irwin inside the ropes at the U.S. Open is natural as can be.

"I think my goal is to get my first drive to the fairway, let alone hit the fairway," joked Steve Irwin.

An Irwin outside the ropes at a U.S. Open, at least one named Hale, that will be unique.

"Steve's been around the game a long time, he's been around professional golf, he knows the ropes," his father said. "He's lived with the fact he's my son and I've lived with the enjoyment he is my son, you know, so it's a win-win for everybody. We're just going to enjoy it and let him do his thing."

That's a luxury both Irwins can embrace.