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Winning NCAA title led Irwin to a Hall of Fame golf career after Colorado football days

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Irwin, scheduled to play in the U.S. Senior Open, is the Senior-Champions Tour all-time leader in wins (45) and earnings (\$26.7 million).

For most athletes, football and golf are like oil and water. They don't mix because the strength training and physical pounding from the first sport make high-level success difficult in the second.

A rare exception is Hale Irwin, one of the marquee attractions at the U.S. Senior Open on July 8 through 14 at Omaha Country Club.

As an undergraduate at Colorado in the 1960s, Irwin was a two-time All-Big Eight defensive back who drew NFL interest. He also won the 1967 NCAA golf championship, which swayed him on which sport to pursue as a career.

“As I got on in my college golf, I could sense how much better I was getting,” Irwin said in a recent interview. “But I still didn't know where I was going to go with it.”

So he set an objective: Before turning professional, he wanted to prove his worth by winning a national event.

“When I won the NCAA my senior year,” Irwin said, “it showed I could compete with my peer group.”

Irwin, now 68, won 20 PGA titles, including three U.S. Opens (1974, 1979, 1990). On the Senior-Champions Tour, he is the all-time leader in wins (45) and earnings (\$26.7 million), and will try for a third Senior Open title in Omaha.

The list of athletes to achieve elite status in golf and football isn't really a list. It may not even be a handful.

Perhaps the only athlete with better or comparable credentials to Irwin is John Brodie, a two-sport star at Stanford.

Brodie became an NFL All-Pro quarterback with the San Francisco 49ers in the 1960s and '70s. He also qualified twice for the U.S. Open — once while still in the NFL — and later earned his card on the Seniors Tour, winning one event.

Irwin took up golf at age 4. His father taught him on the sand greens of a municipal course in Baxter Springs, Kan. (population 4,200). Irwin broke 70 for the first time at age 14, which is when the family moved to Boulder, Colo.

Golf prowess didn't lead to any scholarship offers. But his football feats did. He was legendary Colorado coach Eddie Crowder's first recruit.

“My parents liked not having to put up the money to go to school,” Irwin said. “I really didn't know what I was going to do with my golf.

“But I decided to stay in Boulder. That way, if I got broke into a thousand pieces playing football, they wouldn't have to ship my body very far.”

After a year on the freshman team — one of his coaches was former CU star and Nebraska defensive coordinator Charlie McBride — Irwin became the Buffaloes' starting quarterback as a sophomore.

College football substitution rules at the time limited changes to two players per play, even on a change of possession. During an early-season game at USC, a CU defensive back broke his wrist and Irwin replaced him. He continued to play offense and defense until the eighth game, when a shoulder

injury ended his season.

“After playing both ways and getting hurt,” Irwin said, “I went to Eddie after that season and said I wasn't sure that was for me and that I might concentrate on golf.”

Crowder called the golf coaches at longtime powers Oklahoma State and Houston to gauge interest in Irwin.

“The response was mild, not hot,” Irwin said. “Then I thought about having to sit out a year if I transferred. And a third factor was my father always told me, ‘Don't start something you can't finish.’ So I kept on going.”

Irwin played exclusively on defense his final two seasons at Colorado, earning all-conference as a cornerback. He also was an academic All-American.

“And my golf hung in there,” he said. “I didn't have any major injuries or surgeries.”

Irwin drew interest from eight to 10 NFL teams. But the 6-foot, 185-pounder remembered a couple of losses to Nebraska — particularly trying to cover Husker receivers Freeman White and Tony Jeter — in deciding to give up football.

“When I look at my football career, while I was adequately good in college, I asked myself if I could I have made it at the NFL level,” Irwin said. “I don't know.”

“I wasn't fast enough, I certainly wasn't big enough. As I recall Freeman White and Tony Jeter running across the middle — those were big and fast guys. NFL guys had to be at least that big and fast.”

It proved to be a wise career choice.

Irwin, besides his Open championships, played in five Ryder Cups and has been enshrined in the World Golf Hall of Fame.

He has never played Omaha Country Club, but has spent time in Nebraska beyond Colorado-NU football games in 1964 and 1966.

In 2001, Irwin's golf course design firm was preparing to develop Prairie Sands, a golf-hunting-shooting complex near North Platte. He appeared at a press gathering to hit balls and shoot trap.

The project never came, though.

“The guy who was supposed to furnish the money didn't show up one day,” Irwin said. “It was like he fell off the earth.”

“We were all sick about it. Of all the places I've been fortunate enough to design golf courses, that one would have been really fun and interesting.”



Irwin's upcoming trip to the state will give him the chance to play another widely known Nebraska course for the first time. As part of a charity auction prize, he is scheduled to play at Sand Hills the Monday after the Senior Open.

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