



Irwin won't let his age be barrier to competing



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Hale Irwin won't stand down. He just won't, doesn't believe in it.

"I think there's a lot of things that I'm not ready to give up, one of which is something that has been so, so good to me," Irwin said.

"Golf has not been my life, my family has been my life. This has been an addition to that and I'm not ready to give it up. It still tastes pretty darn good."

List any competitor you admire, baseball's Bob Gibson, football's Larry Wilson, hockey's Brian Sutter ... they have nothing on Irwin. In the theater of golf, he is the ancient warrior, the unyielding grinder.

He is not deep into a conversation about the game's "greatest player," not in the context Tiger Woods, Jack Nicklaus or Ben Hogan might be. But when the conversation pertains to the game's greatest competitor, he is in the front row.

He had a PGA Tour career that included 20 victories and three U.S. Open titles. His last Open came in 1990 at Medinah. He was 45 years old, still the oldest to

ever win the national championship. His PGA Tour career was somewhat overshadowed by his environment, one that included the likes of Nicklaus, Tom Watson, Gary Player, Lee Trevino and others. It was a Tour career that, in midstream today, might make Irwin a household name.

He transitioned into the senior set like no other player before him. In the mid-1990s, the Champions Tour still was somewhat of a traveling salvation show, a place where PGA Tour players could relax and wind down. Irwin doesn't wind down, he winds up.

From 1996 through 1998, Irwin won more than \$7 million with 18 victories and 59 top-10s in 68 starts. Collectively, he has 45 wins on the Champions Tour and over \$26 million in earnings. He won three consecutive Senior PGA Championships starting in 1996, including a 12-stroke victory in the 1997 edition, the largest margin of victory in a 72-hole Champions Tour event.

Irwin won the U.S. Senior Open in 1998 and 2000 for a career total of five USGA titles, and he narrowly missed a third Senior Open in 2004 at Bellerive Country Club when he finished a stroke behind Peter Jacobsen.

He is back at Bellerive this week, seven years later, ready to try again. The former all-conference defensive back at Colorado turns 68 in June, but looks like he could still cover a wideout one-on-one. His golf architecture business based in Arizona has sagged, along with golf architecture as a whole.

With his wife, Sally, he continues to maintain a home in St. Louis. He has three grandchildren now, two that belong to daughter Becky and one by his son Steve. The Joplin, Mo., kid who broke 70 at the age of 14 has reached the age where life catches up, where funerals become more

frequent, where years pass more quickly, where opportunity quits knocking, where everything is framed with reflection.

But when the 74th Senior PGA Championship gets under way at lush green Bellerive this morning, you would be crazy to dismiss the “Frontenac Flash.” Remember, he is the oldest U.S. Open champion in history, the oldest to finish in the top five of a senior major.

At the age of 66 he was third at the 2012 Senior PGA Championship. Last year, he also carded a score under his age, a 65 that included an eagle and six consecutive birdies. Irwin’s last Champions Tour victory was in 2007. But to pull the “stranger things have happened” card on his contending at Bellerive this weekend would be a disservice. Much stranger things have happened.

“Everybody says when you get on the Champion’s Tour you really need to make hay ... between 50 and 55,” Jacobsen said. “Well, I think Hale Irwin has proved that ... he’s extended that age probably to about ... Well, what is Hale, 67, 68? And he still plays as well as he used to.”

Irwin has stopped winning as often as he used to, but he has not stopped. He still has the ability to crank it up when the stakes are highest. He still has a bonfire burning in his belly.

“That’s the way I’m wired,” Irwin said. “I want to continue providing, continue going forward. I don’t want to stop. That ‘stop’ thing is difficult. Everybody who retires is faced with the same decision. When is the time? Is there ever a good time?”

“Some people say, ‘Now’s the time,’ and they know it. I don’t know that right now.”

Irwin has a top-10 this season, a T9 at the Mitsubishi Classic. He had four top-10s in 2012, and his six top-10s in 2011 included fourth-place finishes at the Senior PGA

and the Senior Open. This guy's not an ornament out here. He's not taking a lap for old time's sake. Whatever this guy still has in the tank, he's going to bring it.

Irwin has covered Bellerive's 18 holes numerous times over the past few days. He's played it many times in the past, at corporate functions, etc. This is his home, his house. This is competition and, regardless of what happens, this is what he still loves.

"I'm trying to enjoy what I have," Irwin said. "I'm trying to keep things in perspective. I'm trying to open my front a little more, so I'm not as restrictive to what's a good shot and a bad shot.

"I think any player, at any level — if you talk to Ozzie Smith or someone like that — you reach a stage where your skill set kind of ... you question it. Your mental preparation wobbles a little bit. How do you go about your next expectation?

"That's kind of where I am. My expectations are hopefully realistic, but they're still lofty. Maybe I'm trying to over-achieve. That's a battle I'm facing right now."

That's a battle the competitive Hale Irwin will face the way Buzz Lightyear might face it ... to infinity and beyond.

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