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sports

CU graduate Derek Tolan looks back at the U.S. Open

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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Having completed his college eligibility at CU, Derek Tolan has embarked on a professional golf career. (Hyoung Chang, Denver Post file photo)

If Derek Tolan looks closely, he might find remnants of his childhood on the walls along the staircase in his family's Highlands Ranch home.

Some of those marks were made by Titleists when Derek was 8 years old.

"I'd do all kinds of stuff in the house when I was growing up," recalled Tolan, who turned professional after completing his college eligibility at [Colorado](#) this spring. "I'd chip over the banister. I'd chip over tables. I'd hit bump-and-runs under tables.

"My mom didn't like it too much. But if I got too crazy, I'd use plastic balls."

Other fond memories and playing in this week's Navajo Trail Open in Durango could help Tolan take his mind off the [U.S. Open](#), which begins today at [Bethpage Black](#) on [Long Island](#).

Seven years ago, almost to the day, Tolan made national headlines by becoming one of the youngest players ever in a [U.S. Open](#), at age 16. He had just completed his sophomore year at ThunderRidge High School.

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Golf

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Tolan hoped to return to Bethpage, where he missed the cut after going 26-over par (78-88) for 36 holes. Last month, he failed to advance past local qualifying. So the Navajo Trail Open will have to do.

"It stings a little more when I see all the TV ads about [Bethpage](#)," Tolan said recently. "I wanted to go back there really bad. So many people still remember me for that, it's amazing. I get asked about it pretty much every single round I play."

His father, John, is a club pro who vowed he would never steer Derek toward a career in golf. John didn't have to.

Although Derek discovered during his second round at Bethpage that he lacked the game — or the strength — to blast shots from thick, drenched rough, the experience of playing in a U.S. Open at such a young age was all good, his father said.

"It taught Derek right away that he had a long way to go to be on that level," John Tolan said. "It rained all day on Friday and he couldn't control his golf ball in that type of weather. It woke him up to what it will take to get there. That's a positive."

High expectations

After the 2002 Open, Derek Tolan fell into an emotional trap, human nature being what it is. He felt he had to live up to all those lofty expectations.

Not only had Tolan become the youngest competitor in a men's U.S. Open since 1941, he also was believed to be the first player in history to play in four USGA championships — U.S. Open, U.S. Public Links, U.S. Junior Amateur, U.S. Amateur — during a calendar year.

"I remember signing autographs at Bethpage and hearing somebody tell the next person, 'That's the next [Tiger Woods](#).' I thought: 'What? That would be nice, but I've got a long way to go.'"

"Other people's expectations exceeded mine. I felt I needed to get better quick."

During the fall of his junior year at

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ThunderRidge, Tolan won the Class 5A individual title by six strokes with a pair of 69s. It could be said that he didn't play again to that level until his recently completed senior year at CU — when he won twice and finished his college career ranked among the nation's top 50 players.

That emotional trap seduced Tolan into hitting so many practice balls that he developed bad habits. Then, after his freshman year at CU, Tolan made some swing changes that backfired. It took two years to work out of a slump.

"Basically, I'm really disappointed with the way my college career went," Tolan said. "I thought I was going to win more tournaments (he was winless until his senior year). But when I made some changes with my swing, I got away from what I'd always been doing. I was trying to get better by changing everything instead of getting better at what I already do. I really wish I could get those two years back."

Tolan finally broke free from the funk last summer, CU coach Roy Edwards said.

"The light came on again for Derek when he decided he was good enough if he just worked at his game," Edwards said. "He just started playing golf instead of playing golf swing. When he realized he could just play his game and be himself, a tremendous weight was lifted off his shoulders."

At times, Tolan must have felt like he was free falling from a fourteener to Death Valley. Just three months after he played in the 2002 U.S.

Open, John Tolan suffered a near-fatal aortic aneurysm. Derek watched his father fight for his life. He was in a coma for six days.

"You really get a sense of how fragile life is," Derek said. "At some point in the afternoon, no matter how chaotic the day is, I take a deep breath and am thankful to have a chaotic day."

Rehabbing from crash

More adversity was to follow.

On July 14, 2004, a month before he was to enroll at CU, Tolan fell asleep at the wheel on Interstate 25 while heading home following an early-morning round in the Western Junior Championship at the [Denver](#) Country Club. The rollover accident left Tolan with a fractured right ankle, which kept him off the golf course for four months. Tolan delayed his enrollment until January 2005 and redshirted. Three screws and some soreness remain in that ankle.

During Tolan's freshman year at [Colorado](#), longtime Buffaloes golf coach Mark Simpson died after a year-long battle with lung cancer. Tolan has said that the opportunity to play for Simpson was the major reason he picked CU over the University of [New Mexico](#).

Then, just when Tolan was hoping to impress his new coach (Edwards), he couldn't seem to put the ball in the fairway. Through all the trials, tribulations and bogeys, Tolan managed to remain focused, and upbeat, about the future. In May, Tolan earned a bachelor's degree in

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sociology.

"I think a lot of people would have bet against me doing that," he said, referring to his comments to reporters seven years earlier at Bethpage about schoolwork not being a priority.

After the Navajo Trail Open, Tolan will stay in the [Four Corners region](#) and play next week in the [San Juan Open](#) in [Farmington, N.M.](#) Future stops include tournaments in [Kansas](#), [Nebraska](#), [Iowa](#) and [Missouri](#). Tolan also has entered the Colorado Open and will attempt to play his way into Nationwide Tour events in Monday qualifying. He began his pro career this month by earning \$1,200 for a fifth-place finish in the [Socorro \(N.M.\) Open](#).

Socorro isn't exactly [Pebble Beach](#), but Tolan will try to earn a spot in the big time during the [PGA Tour](#)'s fall qualifying. If that fails, options for next year include mini-tours and overseas tours.

"Derek doesn't need to change much at the next level. He just needs to get a little better at everything," Edwards said. "The line between where he is now and the [PGA Tour](#) is pretty razor thin. The thing that's going to be an advantage for Derek is he doesn't do anything bad. And he knows his game. Those are traits that all the guys on tour have.

"And he has a love for the game that's only matched by a handful. I like his chances."

Tom Kensler: 303-954-1280 or

tkensler@denverpost.com

Bethpage was no place for beginners

A look at then 16-year-old Derek Tolan in the 2002 U.S. Open at Bethpage Black, which played 7,214 yards to a par 70:

Opening Round Tolan's 8-over-par 78 was better than it sounded. It beat the scores of [Tom Kite](#) (80), [Hale Irwin](#) (82) and defending U.S. Open champion [Retief Goosen](#) (79). Tolan recorded one double bogey, seven bogeys, nine pars and a birdie. He hit eight of 14 fairways.

Says Tolan: "I didn't think I was going to be all that nervous. But just watch the tapes. I was walking funny."

Second Round Tolan missed the cut after an 18-over-par 88. In wet conditions, he slopped around with a triple-bogey 6 on the par-3 17th, five double bogeys and six bogeys. About his only highlight was a birdie on the par-4 final hole.

Says Tolan: "You had to use such long clubs and the rough was so thick, there was nothing you could do out there. It was the hardest conditions I've ever played in. I was lucky to not let the club go flying in the stands."

Tom Kensler, *The Denver Post*

Young Derek Tolan was overmatched at the 2002 U.S. Open at a tough Beth- page . *Getty Images file photo*

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Tolan's trials and tribulations

A quick look at what has happened in Derek Tolan's life since he played the 2002 U.S. Open at Bethpage at age 16:

- At the 2002 Open, he missed the cut after going 26-over par (78-88) for 36 holes.
- Believed to be the first player in history to play in four USGA championships (U.S. Open, U.S. Public Links, U.S. Junior Amateur, U.S. Amateur) during a calendar year.
- Won Colorado high school state title as a junior (October 2002) and was fourth as a senior.
- After graduating from high school, he was in rollover car crash in July 2004 in which he broke his right ankle and needed surgery. He didn't play golf for four months.
- In January 2005, he started a semester late at the University of Colorado and redshirted.
- During freshman year at CU, longtime Buffaloes golf coach Mark Simpson died. Simpson was the reason Tolan picked CU over [New Mexico](#).
- After freshman year at CU, made swing changes that backfired and put him in two-year slump. He stroke-play averages were 75.4 as sophomore and 74.9 as junior (ranked No. 216).
- Finished senior year at CU ranked No. 47 among college players, seventh at the Big 12

Tournament and set the CU single- season record for the most rounds in the 60s, with 10. Tied as co-medalist in two events in the fall season. Earned degree in sociology.

- Started pro career June 4 and earned first check: \$1,200 for a fifth-place finish in the [Socorro \(N.M.\) Open](#).

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