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SPORTS

Jack Nicklaus returns to Denver area to watch son Gary in U.S. Amateur

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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Jack Nicklaus watches his son, Gary, during the US Amateur at CommonGround Golf Course in Aurora on Monday. (Aaron Ontiveroz, The Denver Post)

AURORA — Arguably the greatest golfer in history, Jack Nicklaus played the part of spectator Monday with wife Barbara to watch their son, 43-year-old Gary, shoot a 1-over-par 71 in the opening round of the U.S. Amateur Championship at CommonGround Golf Course. Jack Nicklaus, who has designed several golf courses in Colorado — including Castle Pines Golf Club and Cherry Creek Country Club — and has a vacation home in this state, no longer competes in tournament golf and spends much of his time designing golf courses along with his sons, including Gary. Jack's record is the stuff of legends: 73 PGA Tour victories, including a record 18 major professional championships. He also claimed two U.S. Amateur titles (1959 at The Broadmoor, 1961 at Pebble Beach) and 10 Champions Tour wins, including the 1993 U.S. Senior Open at Cherry Hills, which will host all 2012 U.S. Amateur rounds after the second round Tuesday. Nicklaus

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spoke with reporters following Gary's round.

Q: How did Gary play?

A: I thought he hit the ball very well. He had a bit of a balky putter. I actually caddied for Gary last week when he qualified for the U.S. Mid-Amateur, and he didn't make any putts. I got back out here and he's putting cross-handed. I thought, "Whoops." Through the first seven holes today he's 4-over par. Then he switched back (to a conventional putting grip) and he made four birdies in a row, so I was pleased with that. When you're 4-over par and it's a windy day and you get back to 71, that's pretty good.

Q: Do you miss those competitive juices? How much do you play?

A: I don't play much anymore. I play about once a month — if I have to. I throw about a 90 mile-an-hour clubhead speed and hit it about 210 yards if I hit it flush.

Q: Expect flashbacks when you return Tuesday to Cherry Hills to watch Gary play in the second round? Besides finishing second to Arnold Palmer as a 20-year-old in the 1960 U.S. Open at Cherry Hills, some forget that you won the 1993 U.S. Senior Open there.

A: I haven't seen Cherry Hills since I was back in 1993. It's been 19 years since I've been there, so I'm looking forward to it.

Q: How does Cherry Hills rank among your favorite golf courses?

A: Well, any course where I won, I like. I've always enjoyed Cherry Hills. It's a golf course that takes discipline. You'd better have a little discipline and put the ball in the right position. I had an opportunity in 1960 at Cherry Hills to play the last 36 holes with Ben Hogan. You talk about discipline. How he played was absolutely magnificent. It was a great lesson for a young guy.

Q: Most golf fans are well aware of your 18 major professional championships but some may not know you won the U.S. Amateur twice, including the 1959 title at The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs. How do you rank those U.S. Amateur titles among your accomplishments?

Q: When I won the Amateur, it was considered a major at that point in time. That's obviously changed through the years as professional golf has become more dominant. But my Amateurs, particularly in '59 when I beat Charlie Coe down at The Broadmoor ... we were all even coming down to the last hole. I hit it about 8 feet short of the hole, and Charlie almost chipped it in. Here I am a 19-year-old kid with an 8-foot putt to win the U.S. Amateur. I made that putt, and that was a big putt in my career because it told me that I could do what I had to do at the right time. That sort of propelled me forward.

Q: Speaking of majors, Tiger Woods has been stuck at 14 major championships since winning the 2008 U.S. Open. Do you still expect him to break your record?

A: Probably. It's getting less (of a possibility) each time you talk about it. He's such a good player. He's so talented, so focused. I would sort of suspect he will. But, then again, he hasn't had very good weekends in the four majors this year. Time will tell.

Q: You had some interesting comments in Orlando, Fla., when introducing Golf 2.0, talking about being a traditionalist but that the sport's leaders need to think "outside the box." Have some ideas you'd like to share?

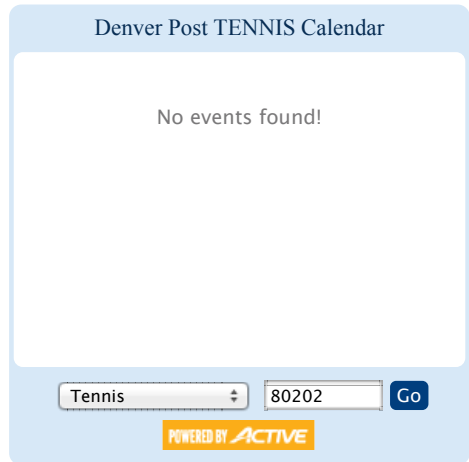
A: We're struggling with our youth into golf. Thirty-six percent of the kids have quit the game of golf since 2006. Twenty-three percent of the women have dropped out of the game. Another statistic that blows my mind is, if you don't start golf by the age of 8, if you start after that, 89 percent leave the game. That's because of all the team sports in park systems. By age 8, kids might pick three sports. We didn't do that when I was a kid. There weren't any organized sports in the park systems until you were maybe 12. It has become abundantly clear that golf

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needs to get into the park systems. We'll figure out how to get clubs that aren't going to hurt somebody, with a ball that isn't going to hurt somebody. Have moveable artificial greens to play on a baseball or soccer field when those sports aren't playing. We can draft kids on (golf) teams like other sports do, and kids will have a blast. Some of those will take up the game of golf.

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Richard Spreier

about a month ago

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