

E6

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Daley aims for another chance on PGA tour

He's halfway there on a circuit that has brought him back to familiar territory.

By Joe Juliano
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Growing up in Plymouth Meeting in the 1970s, Joe Daley would ride his bicycle down Germantown Pike to Whitmarsh Valley Country Club to see his heroes and marvel, wide-eyed, at the way PGA tour pros hit a golf ball.

"It took at the driving range," Daley recalled of the Philadelphia Golf Classic, the last of which was in 1980. "I saw everything — Palmer, Nicklaus, Westwood. I'd be there a couple of hours and then all I'd want to do is leave and hit balls."

"I remembered everything they did and it was great fun."

In his own circuitous way, Daley himself became one of those guys last year, a tour rookie at age 38 after a relatively short five-year pro career in Canada, South America and South Africa, and on various U.S. mini-tours.

One year later, the 1979 graduate of Plymouth Whitmarsh High is on the Nike tour and back in his home area for the Nike Laurel Creek Classic, which begins today at Laurel Creek Country Club in Moorestown. Although he had some good finishes in 1996 — tied for sixth at the B.C. Open thanks to a closing 62 tied for 12th at the Greater Hartford Open, in which he tied the course record of 64 — Daley failed to finish in the top 125 on the money list, a standing necessary to retain his tour card.

Top-15 finish is a goal

He tried the tour's qualifying tournament, in which he didn't finish high enough to get back on the main circuit but did gain privileges on the Nike tour. He's doing all right so far, with \$98,672 in earnings, second on the money list. But, as with everyone playing this weekend, Daley looks forward to the day when he can step back up to the big show, something he can achieve by finishing in the top 15 when the season ends in August.

He learned many lessons in his 27 events last year. It wasn't as easy as his ten golf idols made it appear. "What I learned the most is how to manage my time," said Daley, who moved to Scottsdale, Ariz., at the beginning of the year. "Some people might think there's a lot of time, but our week is very regimented. I also learned how to play the golf course and learn the courses which favor my game."

"I'll know what to expect next year when I'm out there. When I go to Riviera or to Pebble Beach, I'll know what it's like knowing where to stay, where to eat, how to get around. I can think about the golf course instead of thinking, 'Where do I pick up the rental car?'"

Notice he said "I'm out there," not "it."

Learning while playing

The Nike tour has presented the same kind of dilemma for Daley: playing on courses for the first time. But he has made the most of his opportunities, even if he has made just eight cuts in 14 events. Daley won the Louisiana Open in March and tied for third the next week in the Greater Austin Open. He picked up a runner-up finish three weeks ago, in the Miami Valley Open in Springfield, Ohio.

Still, he's not overly excited by his good showing.

"You can only take it one week at a time," he said. "Right now, it really doesn't matter where we're at. There are a handful of guys, we're at halftime. There are still 14 tournaments left. I'm learning as I go along."

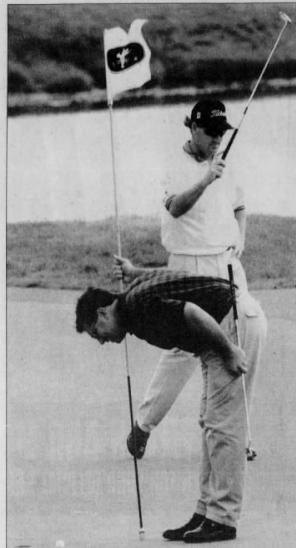
Daley missed the cut for last week's Hershey Open, but all that meant was getting a head start on visiting relatives in the Philadelphia area — his sisters, his mother in Royersford — plus one sister, his wife, Carol, is traveling with him.

"It's nice to be back home," he said. "It's something to see how short the distances seem in getting around. Everything seems closer and a little easier."

It has been a good run for Daley. The former cadet at Philadelphia Cricket Club, Sunnybrook and Green Valley worked for eight years in the finance field, then in 1991 decided to fulfill a dream to become a professional golfer.

Daley said he liked the 6,917-yard Laurel Creek course, a wide-open, links-like Arnold Palmer design that opened in 1990. He hopes it helps him continue his ride back to the big tour.

"That's the goal of a lot of guys out here," he said. "That's my goal. But my goal also is to arrive to be the best player on the Nike tour."



For The Inquirer: MICHAEL BROWN

Wally Cash tries coaxing a putt by Gary Mansmann (not pictured) into the hole on a pro-am leading up to today's start of the Laurel Creek Classic.

On Golf By Joe Juliano

Second-place finish in the Hershey Open lifts Leshner's hopes

There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of professional golfers waiting for the slightest opportunity to jumpstart them toward a berth on the PGA tour.

For Greg Leshner of Lebanon, Pa., that opportunity may have presented itself last week at the Nike Hershey Open, where he was tied for the lead with three holes to play and finished second.

A victory would have given Leshner an exemption on the Nike tour through the 1998 season, plus a shot at returning to the big tour, the performance provided in 1992. Nevertheless, he finished in 1992. Nevertheless, he finished in 1992.

"I made \$19,600 last week, but I'd give up that money for the right to be able to play here the rest of the year," Leshner said Tuesday at Laurel Creek Country Club in Moorestown, where he will play in the Nike Laurel Creek Classic starting today.

"Now I can follow the tour for the rest of the year, play in Monday qualifiers. I had signed up to play in state Opens, and I'm scheduled to go back to the Asian tour in September. But I'd really like to stay out here."

Leshner, 28, just completed his third year playing in Asia. He is not a Nike tour member, meaning he can play in those events by qualifying on Monday, by finishing in the top 25 the previous week or by getting a sponsor's exemption.

With an exemption, Leshner entered Sunday's final round at the Country Club of Hershey 2 shots out of the lead. Going to the 16th, a 219-yard par, he was tied for first with Barry Cheesman.

But Leshner hit his ball in the water and bogeyed the hole. He never got the stroke back, and Cheesman won.

"I was thrilled to have the opportunity," Leshner said. "It's the first time in a while I was in the hunt. I hit a couple of indifferent shots at the end, but I played well all day."

Leshner's first Nike paycheck of 1997 yielded him to 47th on the money list. A top-15 finish at the end of the year wins a PGA tour card, while a spot in the next 10 slots earns a player into the final stage of the tour's qualifying tournament.

"You're only as good as your last week," Leshner said. "If I miss the cut, I have to go to St. Louis (the next tour stop), qualify, it wears you out, but you keep trying."

Anderson's crossroad. Chris Anderson rarely slows down in pursuit of the best competition he can find. The Wilmington pro put 16,000 miles on his car in the first five months of the year playing the Nike tour and various events in Florida, as well as Philadelphia Section A PGA tournaments.

It all caught up to him a couple of months ago.

Royals fire Boone as manager

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