

Long struggle to earn PGA Tour card ends in triumph for some

by *Tod Leonard*

LAKESIDE, Calif. - In the last glow of sunlight Sunday evening at the Barona Creek Golf Club, most of the 25 players who had earned their PGA Tour cards after the Nationwide Tour Championship were crunched shoulder to shoulder, getting their group photo taken.

TOUR BOUND - Kyle Thompson (from left), Jimmy Walker, Richard Johnson and Brenden Pappas will be playing on the PGA Tour this January after graduating from the Nationwide Tour. CNS photos by Jim Baird. They looked like some happy team that had just won a beer league championship. Young or old. Flowing hair or bald. Fit or paunchy. It was their time to soak it all in, the enormous accomplishment of coming away from a grinding, 32-week season with the prize they most coveted - a ticket to the major leagues.

Come January, most will be just unfamiliar faces on the course to the average fan when the PGA Tour season begins. They will tee off at the crack of dawn or late in the afternoon, play in front of few because that is their lot until they prove themselves to be greater.

But every one of them got there the hard way, and there are no doubt 25 fascinating stories to tell about their journeys. Here are four of them:

HANGING ON THE EDGE

Every golfer has had it happen. You hit that perfect putt, superb speed, and as you wait for the ball to make that sweet click in the cup, it stops, seemingly against the laws of gravity, peeking over the edge of the heart of the cup.

We throw up our hands, everybody shakes his head in amazement. Somebody says, "Just wait for the

earthquake." We laugh. Life goes on in your round of 90.

Imagine if one more half-rotation of the ball meant possibly millions of dollars. Then you know what Kyle Thompson felt like in the Nationwide Tour Championship in 2004. The former University of South Carolina star came into the season finale on the edge of earning his tour card. He arrived at the 72nd hole of the tournament needing only a par to get to the big time.

"I knew it was extremely close. I knew every shot was going to make it or break it," Thompson, 28, recalled. "I had a 50- to 60-footer (on 18), and I left it about 6 to 8 feet short. Then the next putt I left it literally hanging on the edge, a quarter inch on the lip or so."

Thompson stared and stared at the ball, as if he could will it to go in.

"I just sat there, wondering how in the world that could happen," he said.

"That's the breaks. That ball goes in and there's no telling where I would be. I could be out there (on the PGA Tour) as a millionaire, or I could have gone out there and flopped and come back here."

Thompson said he didn't sleep any that night. The replay of the putt ran on and on in his head for a long time.

"It was brutal," Thompson said.

Two Novembers later, Thompson can have a different perspective. "It makes for a better story, I guess," he said.

This season, Thompson left no doubt that he would get his card. He missed the first five cuts of the year, but he won twice and finished a comfortable 14th on the money list.

"I'm just ecstatic," Thompson said. "I have learned a little patience. And I always said that I wanted to go up to the tour with a win under my belt, and I've got a couple. That's a great experience to fall back on.

"I always had the feeling I would be up there," he added. "I didn't think it would take this long. You learn a lot. There's a big learning curve in this game. It's not like tennis, when you have a 16-year-old come out there and dominate. For every Tiger, there's a couple hundred guys like myself who really grind and it takes a lot to get out there."

A SECOND CHANCE

Over the course of 2004, Jimmy Walker had a dream Nationwide season. In his third full year, he won twice and went on to become the second-youngest Player of the Year in the tour's history.

Skinny as a lamp post, he attacked the ball with a savage swipe, averaging 308 yards off the tee. With that kind of power, he seemed primed to make a big impact in the 2005 PGA Tour season.

Walker never got the chance to find out.

Hitting balls on the range on the Monday before his rookie debut at the Sony Open in Hawaii, Walker got a pain in his neck so severe it felt like he'd been zapped with a stun gun.

He had to withdraw. After going to four doctors, he was diagnosed with a bulging disk that required full rest.

"It set me in bed instantly for about nine weeks," Walker, 28, said. "It was pretty tough. It finally got to where I could swing again, and I thought I'd go play. It happened again, so I shut it down."

Walker would play only nine times in '05, and he lost his card in '06 while competing on a medical exemption. He missed going to Q School finals in '06 by one shot.

He had met wife-to-be, Erin, in 2004 when she was a volunteer at the Nationwide event in Utah. She was supposed to go to law school in Australia. They got married instead, and she was there by his side through the ordeal.

"I watched it bring him to his knees," Erin said. "He couldn't roll over in bed. He couldn't get out of bed."

At the same time, the couple was given a dose of reality beyond their troubles. Erin's mom, Marcy Stiegemeier, was diagnosed with breast cancer.

"It's then that you realize you play a sport for a living," Erin said, "and it's not that big of a deal."

Stiegeneier is doing well now and attended the Tour Championship, where Walker secured the 25th and last tour card for next year on a nerve-wracking Sunday.

The soft-spoken Walker showed almost no emotion Sunday until the top-25 ceremony on the 18th green was over. Raising his arms in triumph, he said with a grin, "I'm getting more attention than the winner!"

He said he felt as good for those around him as he did for himself.

"When you're in the public eye, people follow and watch you," said the San Antonio resident. "Everybody is looking for some good news. A lot of people live through your golf, and it's nice to give everybody a little cheer here at the end.

"I feel like I didn't get a chance to show what I could do the first time around. I'm happy to have another chance."

WAFFLE HOUSE TO PENTHOUSE

Augusta, Ga., in April 1997. The site of a seminal moment in golf, when Tiger Woods won his first major, the Masters, in record fashion.

It was a life-changing week there, too, for Richard Johnson.

The Cardiff, Wales, native had graduated from Augusta State in 1995 but was waffling about trying a pro career, and so it came to be that he became manager of the Waffle House no more than 500 yards from the entrance to Augusta National.

As manager, Johnson worked over the hot grill, and he recalled how hectic the week was. His biggest memory: "David Duval eating in my restaurant."

Some wealthy English friends of Johnson's brother had come to the Masters, and when they saw his sad plight, they offered on the spot to financially sponsor his attempt to make it in pro golf.

"I gave my two weeks' notice," he said.

Johnson obliged, but for a long time his heart still wasn't in it. He struggled in Europe and didn't get on the Nationwide until 2000. In a four-year span he made only about \$51,000, and he went back to the restaurant business for a time, managing a Chili's in Fort Smith, Ark., in 2002.

"I tried to keep quitting," he said. "I tried to get (golf) coaching jobs, but nobody would hire me. So I said, 'Well, I guess I'll go play golf.'" The 35-year-old is thrilled with the decision now. His second win of the season on Sunday made him the season money champion with \$445,421.

Despite a record-breaking score of 20-under for the Tour Championship, Johnson said he's pretty sure his

game is still a work in progress. Even Sunday, when he was leading by five shots, he admitted wondering to himself, "How can I mess this up? I felt things slipping with my swing.

"I've got to get my body in shape. I'm too old for this," he added with a chuckle. "I've got a lot of work to do in the next few weeks to get ready for Hawaii."

THE 'BUBBLE BOY'

South African Brenden Pappas is so good-natured he didn't mind giving himself the nickname "Bubble Boy," in the first week he got to No. 25 on the Nationwide money list. After the fourth week, though, he was pretty sick of it.

Pappas, 37, the brother of tour pro Deane, was as low as 81st in money in April, but with one solid effort after another - 13 straight cuts to close the year - he climbed finally to No. 25. And there he sat for a month, heading into the Tour Championship.

"I can tell you, it was tough," Pappas said. "To maintain your focus ... it was tremendously draining physically. Mentally, I was just a basket case."

Yet at Barona he couldn't have been prouder of himself. He shot 66-66-68 to get off the bubble, and his closing 67 got him a tie for fifth and the 22nd spot on the money list.

"Considering the ramifications, it was a walk in the park," he said. "I was about as solid as an individual can be this week."

He is looking forward to returning for a fifth season in the big leagues.

"This is a testament to how much I improved physically and mentally on the golf," Pappas said. "Now I get to showcase my improvement on the PGA Tour."

After Sunday's finale, Pappas ceremoniously penned one more "Bubble Boy" signature on a ball for a friend.

"The bubble has burst," he deadpanned. "I plan to turn my back to the bubble in perpetuity."

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