

Champions Golf Event Promises to Provide a Boost for North County

By Stu Durando, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

The initial pitch for St. Louis to host a tournament on the PGA Tour Champions was made with a stipulation, and it was important enough that organizers weren't willing to bend.

The event was to be held at Norwood Hills Country Club or it wouldn't be held.

Although busy through the years, the facility has not hosted a major professional tournament since 1973. But the selection of Norwood Hills, which is in Jennings, was about more than golf.

It was about bringing a charity event to north St. Louis County and pumping money into organizations and the community.

"Creating this was really contingent upon holding it in North County," said Nick Ragone, executive vice president for Ascension. "That was the one condition we had as we started discussions. The tour came out and took a look and understood the vision."

In its 99th year of operation, Norwood Hills is contracted to hold the event for four years, starting with Friday's first round, with all proceeds going to charities. It will mark the return of some of the game's great players to a course where Ben Hogan, Lee Trevino and Gene Littler have won.

It is one of two major boosts for golf in North County along with the upcoming renovation of Normandie Golf Course by Jack Nicklaus, who also is serving as an ambassador for next week's tournament.

Norwood Hills and Normandie are two of the oldest golf clubs in the area. The two courses at Norwood have remained in good condition and will be played by some of the most successful professionals of recent decades.



The Charity Classic was postponed last year due to COVID, but organizers still were able to raise more than \$200,000 for its charities, all focused on youth in the area. Additionally, a clinic will be held for kids from those organizations Thursday.

Exposing African American youth to the game is a component of the event.

"We have a diverse membership, and it's important to bring that to light and help make golf more inclusive and diverse," said Pat Britt, who was president at Norwood Hills at the time the tournament was created. "That's a major goal and you can really see it from the corporate support for a first-time event."

Norwood Hills is known for having two courses, including the East Course, which is relatively unchanged since the



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opening in 1922 as North Hills Country Club. The club did not allow African-American membership for a time, according to historian Bob Phillips.

The West Course is where the 1948 PGA Championship was played with Hogan winning the title. Few of the players at the Charity Classic will arrive with experience on these 18 holes.

Phillips, 89, became historian decades ago when it was realized that Norwood Hills had no one officially documenting its history. Among his achievements has been the collection of memorabilia.

He visited the Ben Hogan Museum in Texas and was given a hat Hogan is said to have worn at his win in '48 along with a 3-wood from the PGA Championship. He also had a copy of that year's Wanamaker Trophy made by a company in Canada for \$26,000. They are part of a display in one of the club's trophy cases.

"Unfortunately there's very little in writing about the history that's available," Phillips said. "That's why I tried to build stuff into the trophy cases."

He also has memorabilia from the Greater St. Louis Golf Classic, which was held in 1972 and '73. Trevino won the first by one shot over Deane Beman, and Littler won by one shot over Bruce Crampton.

The course also hosted the the LPGA's St. Louis Women's Invitational from 1965 to '69. As more courses began dotting the landscape, the larger pro events started moving to other clubs in the region.

"Bellerive started picking stuff up, which took it out of our hands," Phillips said. "Once you get invited as Bellerive has, it's hard to get back in the loop."

Norwood Hills is back in the loop and could be looking to add more events. Ragone's hope is that the Charity Classic becomes the most lucrative charitable event on the tour after successfully adding many large sponsors.

Ragone said all proceeds will go to community organizations. It's an endeavor that Missouri native Hale Irwin, who has the most wins ever on the Champions tour, can get behind.

"Many of us who have been on the tour a long time have seen how golf has influenced communities we've played in over the years," he said. "Our roots are embedded in the game, and it promotes giving back the best we can. It's not always about money and trophies and titles but the people you positively affect."



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