

Tom Cade: Hello. This is Pod for the course, and I am Tom Cade, the Senior Director of Communications for Washington Golf. And today we have with us Tyler Johnsen, who is the Executive Director of the Washington Junior Golf Association. Tyler, thanks so much for taking some time during your day today.

Tyler Johnsen: Yeah. Thank you, Tom. I'm happy to do it.

Tom Cade: Yeah, great. I know you've got some things going on. Today is July 14th and your season has begun.

Tyler Johnsen: Yes, yes. We kicked it off yesterday, so we're back on the course. It's good to be back on the course.

Tom Cade: Yeah. You've got, I believe it's called the Western Open happening right now. Is that right?

Tyler Johnsen: Yep. We have Western Open down at Capitol City in Olympia.

Tom Cade: Capitol City in Olympia, yeah. So I know that many other schedules and calendars have been postponed or canceled and you were probably no exception for the WJGA. I think you had to make some adjustments because of the virus situation. Is that right?

Tyler Johnsen: Yes. Yeah. We had to make several adjustments. Unfortunately, a lot of tournaments canceled as well. This particular tournament we're having right now, it would be probably considered one of our more major events so we wanted to try to hold it at all costs. So it was originally scheduled for March in Capitol City here. The head pro has been great and flexible. I think we had to change the dates twice before finally settling on July 13th and 14th here. Several of our other spring events are pushed back into August now. But generally our WJGA season, we have 24 one day sub-district tournaments from mid June to mid July that we unfortunately had to cancel this year just with everything going on. It was going to be too difficult to manage them safely and effectively. But we're back now and happy to be here.

Tom Cade: So going forward from today onward for the rest of the season, how many tournament's will you be having?

Tyler Johnsen: So we've got a tournament on Thursday this week at Port Ludlow, and it's going to be a team event for the kids that missed out on their high schools season. They can get one last chance to play as a team. And it's just going to be a 18-hole, three person team, total score wins. But then next week is our traditional district championships. So we have six districts across the state that all of them have a two-day district championship for state qualifying. So we'll have six of those next week across the state, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. They're either kind of on different dates. And then we'll get our state tournament field from those district championships.

And state's going to be at Manito Golf & Country Club the first week of August this year. They've been great with everything going on. They still said we want to have you guys and you're going to be a priority if we're able to. Yeah. We're hopefully going to get these district championships in and the state championship in. That's our top priority. And then we have a couple of more, the Eastern Open, Players Open following state. So still able to hopefully have a nice full summer here.

Tom Cade: Yeah. So the WJGA basically your statewide championship, you crown the state junior champions, yes? That's technically what they're called, the state champions?

Tyler Johnsen: Correct. Yep.

Tom Cade: Yeah. So you mentioned a few minutes ago about giving the high school teams a chance to compete. And I imagine that most schools, their spring seasons were basically just canceled. They were wiped out pretty much. Is that correct?

Tyler Johnsen: Yes. Yeah. The kids that play in the fall, they got to have their team season and play their districts. But state championship is in the spring and about half the state has their high school season in the spring, and it was completely wiped out, yep.

Tom Cade: Yeah. So how has your participation signups gone now that you've started up again? Has that gone well? Are kids really looking for places to play? Or what's happening?

Tyler Johnsen: It's gone really well. Overall membership is going to be a little bit down this year, just because when it all hit, we opened registration March 2nd and it was really going really good for a couple of weeks. Numbers were actually quite a bit up from the previous year and then all of a sudden COVID hit and the membership, new members really started lagging once that happened. And now they're picking up a little bit. But the overall membership is going to be a little bit down this year it looks like.

But our tournament participation has been great. We've got, here at Capitol City this week, 192 kids playing. Our team event is going to be full on Thursday. Our district championships, all of them have 100 plus kids. So the tournament participation is going to be great. Just seeing the kids and parents out here for the first time this year, it seems like they're all just so excited to be able to have some sort of true normalcy and get back competing. Because they've been playing golf, but not really been able to compete at a high level yet.

Tom Cade: Yeah, sure. As an organization, what steps do you have to do while on site to adhere to the protocols that are currently in place, and the guidelines for safety and things like that?

Tyler Johnsen: We've put forth a COVID-19 policies and procedures document that we've sent out to every family that is playing in our event. We're telling them they need to self screen before coming to the event. If they show any signs or symptoms, or fever, or even just any sign of feeling unwell, they need to let us know and they can withdraw with a full refund. But then once they get here, obviously there's the new statewide mask mandate, so requiring masks inside the clubhouse or pro shop unless you're eating and drinking. Then we're really just lots of science for strict six feet social distancing at all times outside, not letting parents on the practice facilities, driving range, putting greens.

We've got our traditional starter, but it's actually worked out pretty well yesterday. We've got hula hoops set up about eight feet apart, so the players come up to the tee and direct them to stand in the hula hoops. So we get them standing in one spot the whole time while we're on the first tee, giving them information they need and just eliminating all touchpoints and congregation basically in the starter's box. So not grabbing tees and ball markers, no scoreboards. It'll all be online this year. No player check-ins. Just be at the first tee for your tee time.

Tom Cade: Things like course setup, like touching the flag stick, are you doing the raised cup thing or anything like that? No rakes in the bunkers?

Tyler Johnsen: Yeah. No rakes in the bunkers. We are playing you cannot touch the flag stick. So we're kind of going on a course-by-course basis with that. We have a set of the pool noodles for each district should they need to use them in the bottom of cups. So the ball was still drop into the cup, but just not far enough that you need to touch the flag stick to retrieve it. Capitol City, the head pro here actually, they have the Capitol City Am this upcoming weekend, so he cut up a brand new set of pool noodles for us, so they look great in there. No, we're playing lift, clean and drop is how we're playing bunkers for WJGA, just because the bunkers are nice and clean in the morning and we don't want them touching the ball unless they have to. So we thought making them drop it would at least make them think about picking it up.

Tom Cade: But the kids understand what's going on you think? They get it? They're having no problems following what the guidelines are?

Tyler Johnsen: Yeah. They seem like they've been well-trained these last few months. I'm looking out. We've got probably 40 kids warming up right now in the driving range and putting green, and they're all nicely spaced. You go out in the course and watch them. There's a lot of putter tapping now instead of handshakes. Yeah, I was wondering if the kids would have masks to go inside the clubhouse and every single one of them has had one that I've seen. So it seems like, unfortunately, this is the new normal right now, so they're kind of used to it. And it was a really good first day yesterday.

Tom Cade: Well, you've got some good weather going on, too. That's been very helpful I'm sure.

Tyler Johnsen: Yes. Yeah. We're usually here in March, so everyone's been saying that this is a whole lot better than March weather.

Tom Cade: Yeah. Maybe you've answered this already, so spectators or parents, are they allowed to follow the groups?

Tyler Johnsen: We are allowing spectators and we are not putting a limit to the numbers. Most don't have more than one or two following them. But if they had an aunt and uncle or siblings, they're welcome to come out. We're just telling them you have to maintain your six feet social distance at all time. And we were wondering how it might look around the clubhouse as kids were warming up. We had 192 kids yesterday and really it was not an issue with too many people congregated at once. Everybody's just seems like they've understood that you got to stay six feet apart. And then once they get out on the course, obviously very easy to stay away. So thankfully golf is natural for that.

Tom Cade: So 192 players. Yeah?

Tyler Johnsen: Yep.

Tom Cade: That's a large field. It must be a long day. Morning and afternoon rounds, is that what it is?

Tyler Johnsen: Yeah. Well, traditionally we do do that. A number one and 10 tee start in morning and afternoon. But we just thought with everything going on in trying to eliminate congregations, just as two waves, it can get very busy very quickly. So we're doing a straight one tee start from 7:00 AM to 2:30 just to avoid that. And we're telling them they can't get here more than 45 minutes before their tee time. They only get a small bucket of range balls for warm up. Yeah. So it was a long day. We're 7:00 AM to 2:30, but yesterday the final group, I think, finished at 7:08. So 192 kids and-

Tom Cade: That's pretty good.

Tyler Johnsen: ... [crosstalk 00:12:35] four hours, 38 minutes. We're pretty happy, yeah.

Tom Cade: That's pretty good. You played foursomes? Twosomes? Threesomes?

Tyler Johnsen: We did foursomes. It just was so many kids.

Tom Cade: That's a good rate for foursomes. That's pretty good.

Tyler Johnsen: Yep.

Tom Cade: I know that the WJGA typically has a group of volunteers helping out. Has that been affected at all this year, or how's that been going?

Tyler Johnsen: That, I think our volunteers were almost as anxious as the kids to get back out here, because I wanted to make that very clear to all of our rules officials and tournament directors that this year we only want you to come out if this is what you want to do and you're comfortable doing it. I think we had more rules officials sign up than we needed for this event. A lot of them say, "I'm going out and playing golf every week, so I'm pretty comfortable getting in my cart and being a rules official." So I think we're just pretty lucky with golf being able to still kind of... And not normal, but at least somewhat normal and get out there and then play like we like to do.

Tom Cade: So personally, Tyler, how long have you been Executive Director of the WJGA?

Tyler Johnsen: So I started November 1st, 2013. So this will be my seventh tournament season with WJGA.

Tom Cade: And I know before that you were at Washington Golf and also the PNGA office in their championship department. That was a pretty good training ground for what you're doing now because you can sort of see it from all sides?

Tyler Johnsen: Yes. Yeah. I think for sure. I definitely would not have been able to be in this position if I wasn't lucky enough to get hired. I think it must been the beginning of summer 2006, I think. John Bodenhamer was Executive Director there and Scotty Crouthamel was the director and the two of them hired me and got me started in my career here. So very thankful to both of them because it was great preparation for this position and I certainly would have never gotten into the profession of golf administration if I didn't get that start.

Tom Cade: Yeah, sure. So kids can still sign up for future events up here coming into the summer, can't they? Yeah?

Tyler Johnsen: Well, we just sent off entries for district championships because now we're under a week away and technically someone could still... Our August events are now on a waiting list, but technically someone could still sign up and get on the waiting list. But we did have to cut off new entries for the district championships just to get tee times out.

Tom Cade: Sure. All right. So Tyler, again, I really appreciate you taking some time this morning. Again, I know you're quite busy I'm sure there at Capitol City running the Western Open for the WJGA. If people have questions or want to find out more information, I'm just going to send them to the website, correct? Wjga.net.

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Tyler Johnsen: Wjga.net, yep. That's perfect. And we will have live scoring links there, too, as our season gets underway. So it's always fun to follow the scores of the kids coming in. We've got our contact info there if anyone has any questions.

Tom Cade: Good. Tyler Johnsen, Executive Director of the WJGA. I appreciate you taking the time. Thanks again.

Tyler Johnsen: Yeah. Thanks so much, Tom. I really appreciate it.

Tom Cade: You bet. Bye-bye.

Tyler Johnsen: Bye.