

Tom Cade: Hello. This is Pod for the Course and I am Tom Cade. I'm the Senior Director of Communications for Washington Golf. And today we have with us, Zac Keener and Zac is the General Manager of Chambers Bay Golf Course in University Place, Washington. Zac, thanks so much for coming on board with us today.

Zac Keener: Tom, I really appreciate it.

Tom Cade: You bet. So, Chambers Bay is a well-known name in the golf community and the golf world. But just to give a brief resume of the course. Opened in 2007, a host of the 2010 U.S. amateur, host of the 2015 U.S. Open as well as numerous collegiate events, local and regional championships, including the 2017 Pacific Coast Amateur, the 2013 Washington Amateur, and in a couple of weeks, you're going to be hosting the Washington Amateur once again. Lots of history there. Lots going on, and came out of the gate firing with both barrels that's for sure.

Zac Keener: Yeah. To think back about all of those amazing championships that we've hosted. I mean, really for us, it's something we love to host championships here at Chambers Bay. So it's always an honor to go over that list again.

Tom Cade: It's a pretty impressive resume in just a short span of time. So Zac, you have been there at Chambers Bay for a while. It looks like since 2007, is that correct?

Zac Keener: Yeah, one of the few staff members that still remains to be here since day one. So yeah. Honored, honored to hold that.

Tom Cade: You were there from day one?

Zac Keener: Yes.

Tom Cade: What was your first role there, Zac?

Zac Keener: Started, you know, was kind of just still getting into the golf industry. So I started just as a golf shop assistant in 2007. So helped get the golf course open and running and then worked as an assistant golf professional for a handful of years after that, through the U.S. Amateur Championship. And then slowly, just over time kind of taking on more and more responsibilities into the position I have now.

Tom Cade: Are you from this area, Zac? Where did you go to school? Where'd you grow up?

Zac Keener: I'm native to the state of Washington. I grew up in Stanwood, Washington, which is up North of Seattle about an hour and a half or so. Went to Stanwood High School, and then from there went to Washington State University. So right out of college, I found myself here down in University Place.

Tom Cade: Were you looking specifically to get into the golf business? Or what were you doing when you got your first job there?

Zac Keener: Kind of an interesting history in golf. My dad moved down to Gig Harbor when I started college. And so when I would come home during the summertime, I started working down at Gold Mountain Golf Club in Bremerton. So that's really where I got my initial start in the golf industry. Worked out there as a cart kid and helped on the range and whatnot, kind of the normal M.O. into the beginning of the golf industry for most people. And then as I worked my way through college, I began to realize the major I had selected wasn't necessarily what I wanted to do with my life. And so, while I sought that out, it was pretty clear that golf was something that I had passion for, played golf since I was 14 and really enjoyed it. So for me, it was a pretty easy decision that, well, let's see where this takes us.

Tom Cade: Well, it's taken you on a pretty good journey so far. It seems like.

Zac Keener: Totally.

Tom Cade: So let's go right to the 2015 U.S. Open. I'm sure you must have had some role in some capacity onsite there. What were you doing?

Zac Keener: You know, fortunately for us, a few of our key staffers, we got to be kind of as involved as the USGA will have for those staff members who are a part of the property. So I was the staffer in charge of the locker room during that week. So it was great to really get into a space where that's kind of a quiet space and intimate space for the golfer, for the players that week. So it was definitely a unique experience to be a part of that. And to be a part of the championship as a whole, just really exciting.

Tom Cade: If I remember right, they needed to build a locker room because there was no facility on site for that. Is that right?

Zac Keener: Correct. Yeah. It's something pretty common for most U.S. Opens, unless you go to some of those real historic clubs with great clubhouses. Really, for the most part, whatever you have, isn't going to be exactly what they need. So the USGA and their teams and their other companies and vendors they work with, they're magicians about building and creating these amazing structures for the players and this experience for them just as much as an experience for the fans.

Tom Cade: So in 2013, again, the Washington Men's Amateur was held at Chambers Bay. And I was there on site, and if I remember right, that was the first event held that played the ninth hole, the par three, from the lower tee box. Am I remembering right?

Zac Keener: Yes. I believe that is correct. Yeah. The first from the lower tee.

Tom Cade: That was kind an unusual time and kind of exciting time to see something done like that, because that was a significant change for that hole.

Zac Keener: But obviously, for everybody who comes out and plays it on the daily basis, to play that as the drop shot that most people are used to, that view is such a characteristic of that

hole. So to completely change it and take a completely different angle at it, very much a different golf hole from down below.

Tom Cade: So that was 2013. And now in 2020, the Washington Amateur again is being held there on August 11th through the 13th. It's a three-day championship. And obviously a lot has happened in the last seven years. The big thing, of course, after the U.S. Open was the change over the greens from fescue to Poa. And I have not seen them recently, within the last year. How has that been going so far now that you've got some growing in, on those new greens?

Zac Keener: The transition has been fantastic. Really, Poa being a native surface to the Northwest, it certainly can withstand the heavy amount of traffic that Chambers sees. We're still fine-tuning our agronomic practices on it. Obviously for us being a links golf course, it's really important that we have that links characteristics. So being able to play the ball on the ground and being able to run shots into the hole, that's really important for us. So the putting surfaces are as quick and as true as we have ever seen them. We are just simply fine-tuning them now to get them as firm as we'd like to, to be able to deliver the kind of exceptional caliber you need to host a championship.

Tom Cade: So the green speeds with the Poa grass on the greens, how are you able to dial them down or speed them up? Or do they get too fast? Poa can run really fast, even normally. And I know some of those greens at Chambers Bay are undulating and large.

Zac Keener: Absolutely, yeah, there are some pretty wild undulations out there. You know Eric Johnson, who is our director of agronomy, he does a fantastic job. So really looking and fine-tuning each one of those putting surfaces to be appropriate and to play the consistent speed. I think that's really important. I mean, you've got some greens out there, some with dramatic elevation and undulation in them, some with more subtlety.

But overall, you want the playability from green to green to be about the same. So there's a lot that goes into making sure all those greens are consistent and keeping green speeds in an appropriate level. For championships, that's always a fine line because you want to make sure to still give yourself opportunity to have some good and fun and creative hole locations. But when you start to get closer to championship speeds, you tend to lose some of those. So really for us, it's just finding that happy medium to be able to have some challenging hole locations as every championship should have, with very consistent and putting surfaces that kind of meet the expectation of that golfer that's coming in.

Tom Cade: When you're preparing for a championship, do you have some of the organizers of that championship come to you and say, this is what we'd like to see on these greens. This is what we'd like to see distance wise, yardage wise, things like that? Do they have requests for course set-up? I guess that's my question.

Zac Keener: I think everybody we've been involved with has always done that, on a very collaborative effort. So whether it's the PPGA, the state, local, whoever. Whatever authority is conducting the championship, there are a lot of good conversations about,

okay, hey, we're looking to play the first hole as a par four on the first day, a par five on the second day. Getting those teeing grounds set the way they want. Getting those hole locations established enough in advance so we can make modifications to our daily operation.

And I think that's one of the really unique things about Chambers Bay. It's very flexible. You can set the golf course up to 7,800 plus yards and make it extremely long and difficult. You can set it at 7,000 yards and make it very difficult with hole locations. So there's a lot of different ways you can move tees forward. I mean, I think that's one of the things that the USGA has done in some of their championships is you think about the 16th hole during the U.S. Amateur. Coming down the stretch, we know it's match play, let's move those tees forward. Somebody really could need that hole in match play. So there's just a lot of flexibility, a lot of fun things you can do out there.

Tom Cade: I know that for the Washington Amateur coming up here, there were four qualifiers that were held to qualify to get into that championship. And this has never happened before in the qualifying for this, but all four qualifiers were full fields. In fact, they all had waiting lists. That has never happened before. And I think a lot of that had to do with the name of Chambers Bay. People are excited to play there. Of course, the other factor was the COVID factor. There are fewer championships and fewer tournaments for people to play in. But nonetheless, we've never had all the qualifiers themselves be sold out, full fields. That's pretty impressive.

Zac Keener: That is very impressive. Yeah. I heard that last week, and really a testament to the championships that Washington Golf holds, being the quality that they are. I mean there is no doubt people search out these championships and put them on the calendar and the docket. And we're always excited to be a part of the conversation to host them. We feel honored to be able to host our state championships. So all of those things are things that we circle in our mind and our team gets very excited about, too.

Tom Cade: 2021, the U.S. Amateur Four-Ball is to be held at Chambers Bay. And it was kind of, I don't know if it was fortuitous or not, but it was originally scheduled for 2019, but it has been bumped to 2021. Maybe that's turned out to be kind of a good thing given the circumstances of the pandemic and all of that. Is that true?

Zac Keener: Yeah. It certainly allowed us the opportunity to get the putting surfaces in a spot where we feel like we can host a national championship like that at the quality that we feel it deserves. So, I mean, that was the initial cause for the move. In having such an amazing relationship with Bandon Dunes Golf Resort, through KemperSports and Mike Keiser, really those kinds of relationships were key in making that move (where Bandon Dunes staged the 2019 U.S. Amateur Four-Ball, while the Four-Ball at Chambers Bay was delayed until 2021). If we didn't have that relationship, we might not have been able to make that transition as easy as we did. So again, when you've got the long car ride away, you can get some of the best golf in the world at your fingertips. So it's really a cool and a great connection to have for us in the Northwest. We were glad to see that championship still remain in the Northwest.

Tom Cade: And really, Mike Keiser is the owner of Bandon Dunes, so that's also a KemperSports managed property. Both facilities are huge proponents of amateur golf. I think that historically, that's been true for both facilities. Yes?

Zac Keener: Absolutely. Yeah. And in very different spaces, for Mr. Keiser and his passion for amateur golf at the facilities he has across the country or across the world now, really standing on his own to say how important that is and how great those things are for the health of the game and the long-term commitments that he's made. It's just really outstanding. And we all, as folks who work in the golf industry, we owe them thanks for taking that on.

Chambers Bay in particular being a municipal site, it's really important that we have those opportunities to be a part of the community and give back in those kinds of ways to encourage, whether it's programs through the Chambers Bay Golf Academy to welcome people to golf, those kinds of things are all really important parts of what we do on a daily basis. So that's our job, to make sure that golf is something for us as a sustainable long-term game and gives back to the community, and hosting events like this year's State Am, next year with U.S. Amateur Four-Ball Championship, it's very prideful for us.

Tom Cade: So, in preparation for the 2021 U.S. Amateur Four-Ball, I believe it's going to be held in May. Are there any changes or tweaks that you're still going to be undergoing before then?

Zac Keener: No major modifications or really any kind of what you would define as "outside the ropes" work on the golf course. For us, it's just fine-tuning those putting surfaces. Kind of what we had talked about. Just making sure that those are ready, in a condition to play exactly how we would want them to play. And so, hitting your stride during a championship week, it takes many months of preparation in advance. So there's rough line preparation that's established now that we're kind of working and tweaking and fine-tuning. And then through the off-season and into our spring programs, we're really going to be focused on firmness of the putting surfaces and getting those just really where they need to be. All the other things that go on with bigger championships, we can talk about those down the road. But we just keep our eyes set on where we're heading in 2021. And that's really exciting for us.

Tom Cade: So I don't know if you're able to talk too much about this, but I know the goal of Chambers Bay has been to host other large championships, other large national championships, in the future. That's still something that's being pursued from your standpoint?

Zac Keener: Absolutely. We still continue to have a great relationship with the USGA. I think the Four-Ball Championship is really important for us. Not that there's necessarily any expectation beyond that, but it's something where we want to be able to stand confidently next to Chambers Bay and say, this is where we're at now. And it gives us great feelings about the trajectory of the golf course to hosting future major championships. And really we are open to considerations of all the championships,

additional men's or women's U.S. Amateur Championships would be something we'd be very excited about. A ladies U.S. Open, a men's U.S. Open, of course, those are the kind of golden tournaments that you can have. With both of those, with either of those, we would be elated to have and talk about. Those conversations are still ongoing. So something for us, I wish we had some news or anything exciting to talk about around the State Am week. But just know that they're happening, they're continuing to happen. And that's definitely our long-term focus.

Tom Cade: Well, that's good news. You know golf fans in this area, they're always asking everybody. Because they want to know. People want to know. They'd like to see it come back. And so hopefully one day they'll make it back. Zac Keener, general manager of Chambers Bay in University Place, Washington. Zac, thanks again so much for taking the time this afternoon. If anyone would like to find out more information they can visit your website at chambersbaygolf.com. And again, Chambers Bay will be the site of the 2020 Washington Men's Amateur Championship, which will be held August 11th through the 13th. Zac, again, thanks so much. And we'll see you in a couple of weeks, on the links course there at Chambers Bay.

Zac Keener: Look forward to it.

Tom Cade: Okay. Thanks again. Bye.