

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 Tom Stebbins of Newman Lake, Washington, just outside of Spokane. And Tom is the owner, and producer, and manager of several events throughout the state, and specifically the Spokane Golf and Travel Show, as well as the Boise Golf and Travel Show, and there's other events as well. But Tom, thanks so much for taking some time today to be with us.

Tom Stebbins: You bet. Thank you, Tom.

Tom Cade: So let's talk about, before we get into the shows, Tom, let's just talk about some of your background. Are you a native Northwesterner or where are you from originally?

Tom Stebbins: Well actually, I grew up in Nebraska until I was 13 and we moved to Montana when I was in eighth grade and finished up college at Montana State, and then wanted to get into college athletics and went to grad school in Miami, Florida. I volunteered at the University of Miami, and then ultimately ended up with a job as the Athletic Marketing and Promotions Director at Washington State, and then at Michigan State. So about 10 years in college athletics, back working for a nonprofit, and then we started doing our own things in 1997.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: Just creating our own events and working for clients, and working in the ski industry, working in the golf industry and a little bit of high school athletics.

Tom Cade: You went far and wide, you moved all the way to Florida and Michigan State?

Tom Stebbins: Yeah, we were a novelty in Florida, so...

Tom Cade: Yeah.

Tom Stebbins: Especially from Montana.

Tom Cade: Yeah. You say "we," so who is "we"?

Tom Stebbins: Well, my wife Karen and I, we had gotten married about two years prior.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: So she more than I, because the athletic department was a little more diverse than her retail experience.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: So they thought she was a novelty, it might've been on the Indian reservation or... The Cowboys and Indians was alive in Miami at the time.

Tom Cade: And so, when did you end up back in, or not end up back in Spokane, when did you come to Spokane?

Tom Stebbins: We came to Spokane in 1995.

Tom Cade: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: And then started our own company in '97. And then the Spokane Golf Show about a year and a half later, or a year later.

Tom Cade: 1998?

Tom Stebbins: Yep. That was our first one.

Tom Cade: You started your own company, and that company is called what?

Tom Stebbins: Vision Marketing.

Tom Cade: Vision marketing, okay. And you do more than just the golf shows, what other things do you do?

Tom Stebbins: Well, somehow I've survived, but we didn't have a game plan other than didn't want to work for anybody anymore.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: Which you find out you are working for people all the time, it's just different that nobody's watching you.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: So you're totally motivated on your own and out there and hungry. So, coming from a marketing background I had done events. I was the Marketing and Promotions Director at WSU as well as Michigan State, so I had the responsibility of Game Day and all of that. But anybody can do an event. Well, you can, but there's some subtleties to it. So those are key things within industries that you have to find out where the rocks are, that you need to get involved with.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: And that took us a while. And then we had some concepts that worked within the show, because we provide offers for people coming to the show to enhance them to come and add value to it. And then ultimately the shows took off that

we manage, really in about 2013 when we finally found a retail partner that helped us bring the manufacturers in, and the shows have been growing every year since.

Tom Cade: So first year the Spokane Golf and Travel Show in 1998?

Tom Stebbins: Yeah.

Tom Cade: And the first year of the Boise Golf and Travel Show was what year?

Tom Stebbins: I'm not totally sure, but I think it was either 2012 or '13.

Tom Cade: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: As you know, one of the previous promoters canceled the Boise show like two weeks beforehand and we jumped into the void.

Tom Cade: So for those listening, these are consumer trade shows and they're open to the public, correct?

Tom Stebbins: Correct. Yeah.

Tom Cade: The Spokane Show started in 1998. I remember the Seattle Golf Show started in 1999, that was its first year. So there was something in the wind, I guess, at that time.

Tom Stebbins: Yeah, I'm trying to remember because I know I went to Seattle, but the shows that I distinctly remember going to were the Portland one and then the Vancouver, BC one as we were exploring the show.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: And the first year I had a partner, and what I didn't realize was that she had produced the previous ones that had bombed.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: And so, I was just naive and dumb for not having researched that. But kind of persevered through figuring out where things align, who really is a prospect to come to Spokane, and really who's looking for that Spokane market. And that just helped us zero in on what people were looking for and it's branched into other golf related efforts that we do. But the Boise show last year was almost as large as Spokane and certainly from a financial standpoint because the building costs are way different.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: But it took the lessons of what we learned in the first place, and we were just able to apply them and get it going much quicker.

Tom Cade: I know the Boise market as well is just in general, it's a growing area, correct?

Tom Stebbins: It really is, and I was just down there last week and every time I'm there I'm just amazed at the cranes that you see, and the traffic fill in, the roads. The other thing I was thinking of is wow, the roads here are amazing. It's like five, six lanes from Nampa, or they're working on a bunch of lanes into the core of the city, and they have space and they're planning ahead. So it's interesting to watch versus kind of more of a gridlock to Seattle.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: I was thinking to myself, just distinctly going, wow, I can't believe we don't have three lanes out to all the way to Coeur d'Alene, honestly.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: And maybe four in some of the other things. There's been more traffic.

Tom Cade: Yeah.

Tom Stebbins: And Boise's a growing market, as is Spokane.

Tom Cade: So among other things, 2020 of course will be known for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tom Stebbins: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Cade: And it really hit everywhere in, I guess it was March or so? Your two shows, they happened anyway, correct? Spokane and Boise Show?

Tom Stebbins: Yeah, they did. They were done... The Boise show was the week after Super Bowl, which I think is February, I don't know, is it second week in February?

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: And then Spokane happened two weeks later. We traveled the week after, did some shows, and the Portland Show was the following week. And Karen, my wife, went to that one and I went to the Salt Lake City show.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: And everything went to hell after that.

Tom Cade: Yeah.

Tom Stebbins: We felt fortunate that we got the two shows in last year and we thought we were going to kind of miss the whole thing, but COVID still is around and we're heading into the winter.

Tom Cade: Yeah.

Tom Stebbins: So it's a tough one.

Tom Cade: So you are in the event management production business, and events are difficult because of the restrictions of the number of people allowed inside for large events, things like that. What are some of the things that you have been trying to do to keep this ball rolling, specifically for the Spokane Golf and Travel Show?

Tom Stebbins: Well, actually we planned our Plan B in the middle of the summer, which we knew we needed something, was to have a virtual show or some kind of platform that people could come into. So we signed up for a software platform to do that and have been working towards that very hard, then September came around and it was like, okay, we got to get focused on it.

The challenge is it's brand new for everybody, including ourselves. So, I think on the way we had gone to Montana to see my mom and on our way back, we stopped in Idaho at the Greyhound Park and went to an event there.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: And it was like, wow, there's like nothing going on, but that's Idaho, but that it gave us like, oh, we could pull off a show, not as large, not as big, and we kind of went to that as a Plan B. We did some facility visits, we made sure our retail partner was involved, we've met with our decorator so we know we can do it. Our show size will be considerably less, but we can do a live show. And that's what our plan is and now we're going with just a new product, because it's something we believe we can pull off and make happen.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: So there's still something for everybody in the Northwest, and ultimately we have two audiences we have to please. We have to please the people coming to our show, exhibitors. We have to deliver a crowd. We do everything we can to help them create value and ultimately sales, and come out of the show with a positive experience so that they come back the following year.

And at the same time for our guests that come to us. We hope that they want to have a great experience and they get to kick off the season when the snow's still on the ground, ideally not able to play golf. And then they are able to look at some places, lining up where they can get their travel the coming year, and

make some commitments to get some savings. And that helps again, our exhibitors, as well as our attendees feel good about it.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: And we're kind of the last in the whole thing, and the live show gives us that ability to do it. Because otherwise, we're looking at new things for everybody, a tougher and tougher road.

Tom Cade: Yeah, sure. So this Greyhound Park, where is that located?

Tom Stebbins: That is located in Post Falls, which is exit one in Idaho. So you go all the way to Idaho and the first exit you go to is that one.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: So it's probably two thirds of the way to Coeur d'Alene between Spokane, about 20 miles from where we used to be.

Tom Cade: During your journey about figuring out what to do or how things work, did you talk to the other golf shows in the area, the other organizers in the area to find out what they were doing or what their thoughts were or what their struggles were?

Tom Stebbins: Well, honestly no. Because I'm kind of aware that the Varsity group, which I feel the world for, I knew Seattle was more restrictive than Spokane and in all ways. And then my understanding is Portland shut down so then I'm hearing things. But the one I probably talk to the most is the Utah Golf Show, and collaborated with them.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: Beyond that, it was really... Everybody's got the same universal challenges, every venue is different, every state is different.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: And then we've got attendees that are going to have a different take on whether I come or don't come, and same with exhibitors. And we've started communicating with people. We're going to require masks and have plenty of hand sanitizers there for hand sanitizing, and then masks for attendees as well as exhibitors. Not trying to make a political statement, just trying to keep everybody safe and keep things moving in the momentum that's been built moving forward.

Tom Cade: And the dates for the show are a little bit earlier than typical, it looked like. I know that usually the Spokane Show is held sometime in February or mid-

February, somewhere around there. And this show, this coming year is going to be in late January. Is that correct?

Tom Stebbins: That is correct, it's moved up a whole month. We were scheduled for Feb 27th and 28th in Spokane, and then the only date available at the new venue that was kind of in that range that we could take was January 30th and 31st.

Tom Cade: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: So last weekend in January.

Tom Cade: Have you been reaching out to prospective exhibitors? And if you have, what has been the reaction to that from them about what to do or how to go about this? Or are they looking forward to it? What has been their response so far?

Tom Stebbins: Well, response has been mixed, I'll be honest with you. It's been interesting that it's just the typical bell-shaped curve. I thought it would be easier in Spokane, frankly. We have people that exhibit that aren't golf specific. So what I did was go out to all my golf courses first, since we have limited space, I wanted to make sure anybody who wanted in got in. Out of that initial effort we got some initial acceptance right away and booked those.

And then another group that we talked to that was like, can't come, company policy, internal policy or staffs had been reduced, and in particular destination marketing groups, CVBs from out of area. So that made a difference. And then now it's back to what I hoped wouldn't have to happen, but I got to start calling and bugging people to get commitments.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: Which is pretty typical, so that's not a big deal.

Tom Cade: Sure.

Tom Stebbins: And people like it, people love the show, so it's not like I'm coming off a negative, we're just all dealing with COVID, everybody.

Tom Cade: Yeah.

Tom Stebbins: So it really makes it a challenge for you depending on where you go from highly concerned to no concern, and we're just trying to hit that middle ground of judicious and careful, but still occurring.

Tom Cade: Yeah. So I know that the big PGA Show in Orlando, it's held every January, they have canceled that and are doing a virtual show. And I have not heard any feedback that they have received from exhibitors because that's a big deal. And

as you know, in a trade show, specifically kind of like a PGA Show which is a closed industry show, it's all about people-to-people contact.

Tom Stebbins: Yeah.

Tom Cade: And meeting people in conversations and meetings and the whole thing. And it's hard to do that particular kind of show virtually, I would think.

Tom Stebbins: Well, I would agree but at the same time I would share that we've consciously been trying to get our exhibitors to actually sell something so that it's a business to consumer. But instead of handing out a coupon and hoping they come, provide enough incentive for them to purchase right then and there.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: And that's a little bit different for us because we used to generate \$50 grand in real business done with people putting money in their pocket five years ago. To last year we estimated it was four or \$500,000 for just the Spokane Show, and generated revenue for people that came in from our retailer, as well as to our golf courses who had packages, they provided the best deal of the year.

And in what we're telling them is, hey, you know when there are slow times coming up this year and you know you're going to make offers, so give us that offer. Discount it for those that come to the golf show and make it available for purchase then. And we also have an online program that is an incentive to purchase online and at a time versus walk-up, we offered another discount.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: Those offers aren't unlimited, depending on each particular golf course, might look at it and go, oh, I don't care I'll take as much as I can sell. Others are going, this deal's too good I don't really want to sell so many. And we can accommodate that, and that's what our goal is within what we do.

But it's that kind of conversation. People come to learn about new options and I think find value, or learn about where they might go this summer. But I think also it's just that experience of gathering before the season starts, when there's tons of hope and everybody's optimistic, and weather it's not a factor.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: And how do you duplicate that? And the virtual option, we were going to go with a particular virtual platform for our virtual show and we just made the decision honestly, that it was so complicated. It was complicated for us. There was no way we're going to be able to explain it through, and get it done in the two and a half months that remained before our show to launch it at the same time.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: So our virtual show will be more within system for everybody but a culmination of everybody's links and websites. But then offer great value for those that come into the show and deliver revenue. An early season push for our exhibitors who participate in that, by creating a product that they can get an incentive that goes ahead of time. I know you talked to Brian at Gamble Sands, I'm pretty certain he's going to do it, and he was talking about their normal golf and doing an offer that's show-only that's for 60 bucks. And as you and I know, 60 bucks at Gamble Sands is a big deal.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: It's that kind of stuff that we're trying to secure and make available on our website. And so, it'll be a little different in the sense of that.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: Because that's what goes on at the show so anybody who comes to the show that's great, but our universe of golfers is way bigger than come to the shows.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: And so this will give an option to those that haven't come for distance, or haven't wanted to check it out or whatever, and they can come in and do it without physically being there as well.

Tom Cade: Yeah.

Tom Stebbins: So, we'll see what the outcome is on the other end, but that's the plan.

Tom Cade: Sure. I've seen some of the numbers, statistics from 2020 and it sounds sort of a paradox, but golf experienced quite a boom in 2020.

Tom Stebbins: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Tom Cade: The numbers of players was up significantly, the number of junior players is up, the number of new golfers is way up, the amount of money spent on golf product is way up. So golf itself is strangely quite healthy this year.

Tom Stebbins: Well, it is. Thank you, COVID, thank you. There's no other opportunities, to the detriment of a lot of folks.

Tom Cade: Yeah.

Tom Stebbins: But for us in the golf industry it's a great thing. And I think the real key is to not take it for granted, and be a little more proactive on making sure people

continue to come back. And those that have just experienced golf for the first time get indoctrinated into the whole experience, and feel comfortable at a golf course and feel part of the group or the tribe. And we continue that momentum into the future, which we believe gatherings and consumer shows that share that enthusiasm are a big part of it, we just got to overcome the concern about being indoors.

Tom Cade: Sure, yeah.

Tom Stebbins: Honestly, I had never thought twice about golfing or eating on a patio, but I've been pretty conscious about masking up and doing things indoors and in minimizing being indoors.

Tom Cade: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom Stebbins: And now we're into weather, so it's 30 degrees out here in Spokane right now.

Tom Cade: So today is November the ninth and you've got about two and a half months to go?

Tom Stebbins: We do.

Tom Cade: So from my end I would applaud you for continuing to try to find ways to make all this happen. I know events are a huge thing of what you do and also just a huge part of what you do for the golf community in general.

For those listening, if you want to find out a little bit more about the shows, Spokane Golf and Travel Show, the website is spokanegolfshow.com, and for the Boise Show it's boisegolfshow.com.

Tom Stebbins: Yeah.

Tom Cade: And Tom Stebbins, the owner, producer of the two shows among many other things, I just want to say, thanks again for joining us today, Tom. And again, what you're doing, I think is pretty significant, trying to find ways to make this all continue to work for the golf community in general.

Tom Stebbins: Well, I appreciate it. Thank you, Tom and I encourage everybody to get out and support their local courses and of course the local shows, wherever they may live.

Tom Cade: Very good. Okay, Tom. Thanks again.

Tom Stebbins: All right, thank you. Talk to you later.

Tom Cade: Bye, bye.