

Tom Cade: Hello, this is Pod for the Course, and I'm Tom Cade, the Senior Director of Communications for Washington Golf. And today we have with us Notah Begay III. Notah is a former PGA Tour player with four wins on the PGA Tour. He has been a TV broadcaster/commentator on tournaments on TV. He most recently and probably most significantly conducts the Notah Begay III Junior Golf National Championship. And Notah, we are happy to have you on with us today.

Notah Begay III: Oh, thanks, Tom. It's great to be on. I love that part of the country. I don't get up there very often. So this is a great chance for me to just kind of interact and engage with you and hopefully share some great stories that people would be entertained with.

Tom Cade: Before we get into some of the significant initiatives you're doing right now, I'd like to maybe get some more background about yourself. And specifically for yourself, I see that you were born and raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico. How did it happen for you to get into the game of golf, Notah? How did that happen?

Notah Begay III: Well, as the first and only full-blooded American Indian to ever play on the PGA Tour and ever win on the PGA Tour, it was a pretty challenging road, so to speak. I'm half Navajo, one quarter San Felipe, and one quarter Isleta. Those are all primarily New Mexico tribes. The Navajo Nation does go into parts of Arizona and Utah as well, but has a big chunk of its reservation in New Mexico. Much of my family still live in and on the reservation, and so I travel back to them quite a bit.

So looking at that pathway from the poorest and some of the most desperate communities in the United States to a life of private jets and multimillion-dollar contracts on the PGA Tour, if you can imagine, is quite an interesting road. But I had a lot of people that supported me along the way. Got first interested in the game of golf through my father, who was not a very good golfer at all, but saw enough in me. I had enough interest for him to continue to encourage me to pursue it.

I certainly couldn't afford to play the game on a regular basis. And after about a year of saving up money and recycling cans when that was the thing back in the early '80s, I finally decided to wait outside in the parking lot of my local municipal golf course called Ladera Golf Course. I waited out there one night for the head pro, whose name was Don Zamora, to walk out to his car. And he sees me leaning against his car, and I introduced myself and asked for a job. I told him before he answered to understand that he didn't have to pay me any money. I was a bad negotiator. All he had to do was allow me to practice and play for free, and I would work in the mornings and the evenings for him.

At that point, I was nine years old. So from the time I was nine to the time I was 17 and went away to college, I would work at Ladera. I'd show up at 5:00 in the morning. I'd work til about 7:00, 7:30, sweeping, cleaning bathrooms, emptying trash cans, taking range buckets, filling those buckets with range balls to be sold

that day. And then about 7:30, 8:00, they'd release me. I'd practice from about 8:00am until 6:00pm nonstop, and then I'd help close the shop down. I did that regularly. And by the time I was 17, I had become the No. 1 junior golfer in the United States and had earned a scholarship to Stanford University, and that was my pathway to playing golf at an elite level.

Tom Cade: That's a significant jump to go to Stanford on scholarship from that beginning.

Notah Begay III: Yeah. It certainly was, and I had coaches that volunteered. We passed the hat to get me to certain tournaments. I didn't play a lot of what they classify now as AJGA events. They were just simply a little bit out of my reach. I played a handful of them that were... There was a couple in Arizona I played and one in Denver, but they were just a little bit too expensive for me at the time to be able to pursue that. So I stuck to USGA qualifying, an event called the Big I Insurance Youth Golf Classic, and the PGA of America events, along with local, state events and things like that. So I made it work. It wasn't certainly what you would call an ideal pathway to collegiate golf, but it was certainly something that I paid my dues and put my time in and sort of earned my right to play at a school.

Tom Cade: Well, it became quite a significant experience at Stanford itself. What year was it? What year did you win the national championship as a team?

Notah Begay III: Yeah, we won the national championship in 1994. And at the time, we had four juniors and one senior. Our senior was our fifth man, a guy named Brad Lanning. He graduated. We replaced Brad with Tiger Woods in 1995. And we were the, basically the consensus No. 1-ranked team in the nation most of the year. We went back and forth with Oklahoma State, and we ended up finishing second that year. After over 1,100 strokes in the national championship at the Scarlet Course at Ohio State, both Stanford and Oklahoma State tied, and so we went into a playoff. They beat us. And it's one thing that I never let Tiger forget, is that he made us worse when he joined the team because without him, we won. And then with him, we finished second.

Tom Cade: Yeah.

Notah Begay III: But he likes to blame that on me, too. So it's kind of a back-and-forth that we have that's kind of fun.

Tom Cade: Nice. Okay. What year did you graduate from Stanford? What was your last year there?

Notah Begay III: I graduated in 1995 with a degree in economics, and I had zero intention of ever using that degree because I wanted to play professional golf, and then went out and played the mini-tours for a couple of years. Missed the Q School initially my first two tries. My third year, I got to the final. I finished dead last at the Qualifying School in Florida, but that earned me conditional status on the Korn

Ferry Tour in 1998. I went out. Within the first seven events, I made one cut, which moved me up in my category ranking. So then I was then able to play 22 events the remaining part of the year, and finished 10th on the money list and thus earned my ticket to the PGA Tour for 1999. And went up and struggled. I struggled quite a bit. I was making cuts, but finishing 55th, 65th, 45th.

And then I ran into Seve Ballesteros in the physio trailer. He was working out, and I was working out. Obviously, he's a legend, someone that I looked up to my whole life. And it was tough for me to even muster up enough courage to say hi, being a rookie and he's a Hall of Famer and major champion. But I walked up and introduced myself, and he said, "How's your year going?" And I said, "Oh, it's okay. Not great. I'm making a lot of cuts, but I'm not doing anything on the weekend." He looked at me dead in the eye, and he just says, "You know what? You have to start somewhere." And that stuck with me because I looked at it as an element of encouragement from him saying, "You know what? You're doing a lot of things right to be making cuts on the PGA tour, and something just needs to fall in place."

And I had a great run. About two months later at the... It was called the Buick Invitational, I believe. And that was at that old course in Warwick Hills just outside Detroit. I moved all the way up to the leaderboard. I think I was leading the tournament at one time and then saw my name at the top of the leaderboard. And I absolutely panicked and dropped all the way down the leaderboard and almost missed the cut.

And then it was about a month later that I won my first PGA Tour event in Reno and then followed that up seven weeks later with another win my rookie year. So ended up winning two events my rookie year and got my career off to a great start after a successful and very happy career at Stanford.

Tom Cade: Yeah. It looks like you... The next year, you had two more wins on the tour.

Notah Begay III: Yeah. I mean, the only person that was winning more tournaments than me was Tiger Woods at the time, and he was winning like six or seven a year. So my four tournaments in 10 months was nothing in comparison to what he was doing, and so it was always a bit of a motivating factor for me just to continue to push myself. Unfortunately, about a month after Tiger and I played the President's Cup together, I got injured and never played at a high level again. It was just a continual struggle for about the next 12 years until I stepped away and moved into the broadcast arena, which is where I'm now happily established as a network analyst. And I love my job. I love the people I work with. I love still being connected to the game and now being able to direct my time and efforts into other initiatives, including my foundation, but also this National Junior Golf Initiative that I think is really important as I move forward.

Tom Cade: So I'm looking here. It looks like you founded... The Notah Begay III Foundation you began in 2005. Yes?

Notah Begay III: That's correct. Yes.

Tom Cade: And the main goal for the foundation, Notah, is...

Notah Begay III: Oh, initially, we started out trying to address the type 2 diabetes epidemic taking place in reservation communities across the country. American Indians suffer at the highest incidence of any group in the United States. But a small organization with an operating budget of around \$2.5 million wasn't going to do much to push that back when you had groups like the Kellogg Foundation and other huge, multi-billion-dollar endowed organizations that were throwing hundreds of millions of dollars at type 2 diabetes at the time, and this was about 10 or 12 years ago, and the numbers were still going up. So that was a clear indication to me that maybe we needed to realign our purpose within the foundation.

So now we focus on a broad range of issues that are directed at allowing and encouraging kids to achieve their full potential through health, fitness, cultural leadership, and educational programming. So sometimes our programs take on an educational spin. Sometimes they're fitness-related. During the COVID pandemic, we did a lot of virtual distance types of instructional classes that parents are just thanking us for now because it gave their kids something to look forward to every day. And in a time and a place with so much uncertainty surrounding COVID, the response, the recovery, the impact, we've always got to try and continue to have positive elements for our kids to hold onto. And we were able to do that through much of the pandemic.

Tom Cade: Much of my family still lives in Montana, and there are several reservations in Montana, as you know. And I know from their experiences that during this COVID era, those reservations are hyper-vigilant about people coming and going out of there because of these reasons. Is that correct?

Notah Begay III: Absolutely, absolutely. But unfortunately, the comorbidities that exist in a large section of the American Indian population puts them at such a high risk rate, which is why you see such a high death toll. I mean, the Native American population is dying at 20 times more than the national average. It's unsettling. It's unfortunate, but it's also a reflection on the lack of healthcare infrastructure that exists in these communities. So as vigilant as many of the reservation communities have been, once it gets in there, it's an extremely devastating. It takes an extremely devastating toll on the community.

Tom Cade: So, you're no longer playing. You are broadcasting. Then you started the foundation. And I want to talk about this Junior Golf National Championship now. Did this come out of the foundation? Was this sort of an offshoot of that, or is it part of it or its own entity or what?

Notah Begay III: Well, initially I didn't want to do it. My partner in the venture, Ryan Burr, who I've worked with at Golf Channel for years, had a concept that was born out of

necessity, so to speak. He has a son who is heavily invested in junior golf and is a junior in high school and will probably most likely play Division I golf at some point in the next couple of years. They were coming back from a prominent junior golf event, and his son had just won. And he had won a handful of points for his junior golf ranking and had a \$3 trophy that fell on the ground in the back seat and was already broken on the drive home, while Ryan had spent over \$2,000 for entry fees and hotels and gas money to drive from Orlando to the host site. And he just kind of looked at himself and was like, "Man, there's got to be more to this."

So both of us having a background in television and understanding just kind of the attraction that television and any sort of promotional platform that you can give to these young kids is an extremely interesting thing for them to look at. So we made playing on national television the end goal. So we created just an event around kids having a chance to get national exposure and being able to showcase their talents to coaches across the country and possibly around the world. And so for us to be able to now say, in a venture that we started just over 15 months ago, believe it or not, that 3,000 kids participated last year. That produced a field of 156. Many of our players are going on to play at Division I schools. There's a handful of players that played extremely well that had no attention given to them prior to our event, but now have legitimate collegiate offers on their dinner table worth their consideration.

But the mission of our event isn't to send your kid to a Division I college program or any college program. The mission of our event is to provide kids an accessible and achievable pathway to play competitive golf. We did not turn down one kid last year that wanted to play in any of our events. We said no to nobody. And I think that in order for us to grow this game, we need to start saying yes to young kids that show an interest in golf, and we need to say yes to trying to find ways for them to stay engaged because our game, at many points and at many turns, keeps telling us no. 'No, you can't play here because you don't belong here.' 'No, you can't play here because it's too expensive.' 'No, you can't play here because there's no facilities near you.'

It's a 'no, no, no' process for a lot of young kids that want to enjoy what you and I have sort of come to be second nature in our lives, which is this game. So our mission of our event is to keep kids. We had kids that were shooting in the 90s and the 100s last year, and I want them to come back because I want to keep them in this game, not because I think it's important for them to play on the PGA Tour or go play at Stanford, but because golf is a game that sticks with you for a lifetime. And when we're in an era where the video games and all of the digital platforms are just sucking up so much of our time and so much of our interest, going out and sort of re-winding things a little bit, getting on the tee box and having to focus intently on a singular activity for 15 to 20 seconds while you engage in that particular golf shot is an extremely valuable skill for young kids to learn.

My son is now picking it up. He loves it. I find it calms him down. I find that his attitude at home is better. He's more respectful to his parents, to his siblings because of his time on the golf course, because you can't rush it. You can't rush the game. It comes at you at its own pace. And that's something that I want to give to another generation of young golfers. And this Junior Golf National Championship is the best way for us to do that.

Tom Cade: So this last year then, 2020 was the first full year? Is that correct?

Notah Begay III: It was the first full year. And like I said, we had over 3,000 kids try to qualify. We've got wonderful partners in Wilson Golf, in Nike Golf, in GOLFTEC, in Junior Golf Hub that are all aligned and ready to engage these young kids with product support and technological support, equipment fittings, guidance on practice measures, how to get better. And it's all accessible through our platform. We're just trying to create the singular point of entry for any junior golfer at any skill level to be able to engage with us and find something valuable that helps them in their own development, in pursuit of their own goals.

Tom Cade: I'm looking on the website right now, which is jgnc.org. And you've already got the schedules laid out for 2021. And I see that in the Puget Sound area, the Seattle area, there are four local qualifiers already set up, and online entries are available on that website. And there is to be a regional qualifier up at Loomis Trail Golf Club in late July. But evidently, this was pretty much the similar scenario that you did last year. There was a series of qualifiers that I noticed and then a national championship. Correct?

Notah Begay III: Yeah, that's correct. The newest layer, which we're able to add because there's a little bit more certainty. Last year as a startup, COVID hit, and we weren't sure if we were going to be able to continue. But we collectively decided to continue to move forward. And we eliminated all of our local qualifiers just because of the circumstance. But now we're able to reintroduce those in what we feel is in a better fashion so that anybody, like I said, anybody that's on the periphery of whether or not they want to play competitive golf can sign up. And that's why we have so many local qualifiers. They're not going to be fields of a hundred kids. It's going to be somewhere from 25 to 50 kids, and over 50% of those fields will earn their way into the regional.

So it's not like we're sending 20 kids out to qualify for one spot, like I used to have to qualify for the U.S. Junior or the U.S. Amateur here in New Mexico. It's like 20 kids are going to go out, and 10 kids are going to get in. So we're trying to create this situation where there's success waiting for the kids as they put themselves out there. And I think that's the energy and the mentality we're trying to create around this; we want to engage, we want to reward, and we want to make this as positive of an experience for every single kid that signs up, and that doesn't break the bank.

These 18-hole qualifiers are \$139, and with an opportunity to earn your way to a regional qualifier. And if you do earn your way to a regional qualifier, all you do is pay the difference in the fees, and you get apparel from Nike. You get golf balls from Wilson. You get a free club fitting from GOLFTEC, a free swing analysis from GOLFTEC, and access to the Junior Golf Hub. So if you add up the value of all of those benefits, it's close to \$500. And the overall entry fee for the kids is \$299.

Tom Cade: And again, it looks like the entries can be taken online at jgnc.org. There are four local qualifiers in the Seattle area, one in April and May and June and July, with the regional in late July up at Loomis Trail. And I see also that you've partnered with the WJGA, the Washington Junior Golf Association, which I think is a pretty good setup between the two associations. Yes?

Notah Begay III: Yeah. I mean, synergies in the industry are important. The WJGA has been around for a long time. They know the landscape. They've got the junior golfers, and we want to come in and be an asset to what they're already doing. We're not coming in to compete or make anybody feel uncomfortable. We're trying just to create this pathway again. "Where does it go?" I guess, is what a parent or a player has to ask themselves, is saying, "Hey, look, I can keep playing locally for a long time, but at some point I've got to get to a national level if I'm good enough."

So if you can get through the local qualifier, it means your skill level is at a certain point. If you can get through the regional qualifier, it means that your skill level has elevated to a certain point. And when you're competing at the nationals, if you just look at the top 10 players that finished in the boys' 14-to-18 division this past year, there are kids going on scholarship to University of Alabama, Auburn University, University of Oregon, the 2016 national champion, Illinois, Texas. All of the best golf programs in the United States are represented in that top 10.

So if you are able to make it to the nationals through our system, you have identified yourself as being one of the premier junior golfers in the United States. And because of our television platform, now college coaches can go on our website and possibly be able to catch a swing or two of yours on the broadcast.

Tom Cade: And speaking of opportunity, I see that the winner of the 14-to-18 age group of your most recent national championship received an exemption to play in the Circling Raven Championship, which is a Symetra Tour event, which is the developmental tour for the LPGA. Her name is Allyn Stephens, and she got an exemption into that event, which is a pretty awesome thing for her.

Notah Begay III: It really is. And she's got a great story. Allyn Stephens is an African-American young lady from Houston, Texas. Her dad had a very successful career in the NBA and played primarily for the Houston Rockets. After his NBA career, he

went back to school, went to law school, and is now a magistrate judge in the city of Houston. And this is a young lady that didn't have a tremendous amount of interest from college coaches around the country, but because of what she was able to accomplish and to play at that level on a television broadcast, she now has a lot more interest in her abilities. But I think that what the Coeur d'Alene Tribe was able to do for us through the Circling Raven Championship on the Symetra Tour in 2021 is an amazing opportunity for Allyn Stephens as an aspiring young golfer that wants to play at the highest level.

Many of the young ladies that play the Symetra Tour are the stars of the LPGA in the next coming years. And I was fortunate enough to go around the venue with Laura Stensgar, the GM of the Circling Raven property and the casino. And she was a wonderful host, and I got a chance to play with her. I got a chance to play with her sister. They come from a golf family. They know how to play. They play well. They enjoy it. They play by the rules. It was a wonderful experience for me.

But I just was taken aback with just how beautiful the property was and the golf course. And just everything out there was spectacular. So for them to be able to host an event like this, it probably very quickly will become one of the most popular stops on the Symetra Tour. And for Allyn Stephens, our first champion of the NB3 JGNC, it's going to be an experience of a lifetime just to see how she measures up against future LPGA players.

Tom Cade: The Circling Raven Championship is going to be held August 23rd through the 29th in 2021 at Circling Raven Golf Club, which is in Worley, Idaho, which is in the northern part of Idaho, not too far from Coeur d'Alene area. And again, the Circling Raven Golf Club is an amenity of the Coeur d'Alene Casino Resort, which is owned by the Coeur d'Alene Tribe. I have been to Circling Raven myself, and I know it to be a really great golf course. The Symetra Tour has a three-year commitment to play this tournament at Circling Raven, and this is going to be the first year coming up here. They were supposed to start last year, but COVID had other ideas for it. So this coming August is going to be the first year of it, of the three-year commitment. And your connection, Notah, with the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, obviously with your own heritage, I imagine it was sort of a natural connection for you. Yes?

Notah Begay III: Oh, it was a great connection, but the connection was really brought into clarity because I've been mentoring a young lady who is now on the Symetra Tour. Her name is Gabby Lemieux, and she's from the Shoshone-Paiute Duck Valley Reservation in the southern part of Idaho. And she was an All-American at Texas Tech University, set the all-time career scoring average at Texas Tech. Played for Jo Jo Robertson down there. And when I saw her potential, I got in touch with her, and I offered my services as a guide, as a sounding board. So now we've been working together for just over two years.

And for her to be able to qualify and become a full-time member of the Symetra Tour, but also to have an affiliation with another tribal entity in the Coeur

d'Alene venture at Circling Raven, and now to go and participate in their championship in August, I think, is a culmination of a lot of great things that are happening for Native American young people that pursue golf. So I think that she's a wonderful representative of her community. She's a great golfer. And my hope is to see her competing full-time on the LPGA. But everybody's got to earn their way, just like I did. And the Symetra Tour for females is the next stepping stone to the LPGA Tour.

Tom Cade: Yes, Gabby Lemieux, we knew her around here as Gabby Barker back during her amateur days before she went away to school. She was a three-time Idaho state champion. And we're very aware of her game. That's for sure. She went to Texas Tech, as you said, and then shortly after that, she married, and her name is now Gabby Lemieux. And yes, she is going to be playing at the Circling Raven Championship. So we'll look forward to watching her out there as well.

Notah, I appreciate your time today. You obviously have a lot of commitment in seeing this through, and for giving back to the game. As you said, it was a bit of a long and winding road for you, and for you to now be in the position in life to create opportunities for other young people must be a good feeling.

Notah Begay III: Yes, it definitely is. I was fortunate in my youth, and now through my foundation and through the NB3 JGNC, we want to be able to show kids the possibilities are there in life.

Tom Cade: The website again is jgnc.org. Notah, thanks so much for being on with us today. Looking forward to a good 2021.

Notah Begay III: Thank you, Tom.