

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 Sean Kato of Redmond, Washington. Sean plays for the men's golf team at Oregon State University. And last year, Sean won the Washington Men's Amateur Championship, which was held at Chambers Bay. Next week, the Washington State Amateur will be held on the Olympic course at Gold Mountain Golf Club in Bremerton, Washington, and Sean will be there to defend his title. Sean, thanks so much for joining us this morning.

Sean Kato: Yeah, thank you for having me.

Tom Cade: So let's just jump right into this. Let's talk about last year's championship. Because of COVID and the pandemic, there were so many events and tournaments and seasons that have been canceled and not very many places for competitive golfers to play. So for you, I believe the season for Oregon State, was canceled last year, correct?

Sean Kato: Yeah. We canceled kind of mid-March 2020 when everything was going crazy. So yeah, it was really good to compete last year. There's very limited tournaments, so yeah it was a big deal for me.

Tom Cade: What other events did you play in last summer leading up to the State Amateur, but also after that as well?

Sean Kato: I played in the Oregon Am, that was back in June. And then I really had nothing after that. And then obviously, we learned like that week of the State Am last year, the Pac-12, didn't have a fall season, so I really wasn't playing in a lot. And I came into that week with not a lot of tournaments, like I hadn't really played in one in a long time. So it was really nice that Washington Golf was able to have that and hold it safely and they ran a great tournament.

Tom Cade: Last year you went wire to wire, you led all rounds. And I remember, I was there actually, the last day, the last round you had been caught during the middle of the round, but you birdied two of the last three holes to pull it out. That was a pretty exciting finish.

Sean Kato: I definitely didn't mean for it to be that exciting I guess. I went into the final round with a five-shot lead I believe. I played really well those first two days at Chambers, but I don't know, it had been a while for me leading in a tournament and it's kind of one of those things where you almost have that expectation of when externally and internally, but I was able to kind of lose all that and just try to play good golf those last four or five holes there. And I birdied 16 and 18 at Chambers and it was a really good feeling. It probably was one of the best putts of my life, 10 feet on 18 there. So yeah, it was really cool. And it's an honor to be on that trophy.

Tom Cade: A lot of nice names on that trophy: Fred Couples, Joel Dahmen, John Bodenhamer, on and on. It's pretty cool. So that was towards the end of the summer, last summer, when that event was held. The team at Oregon State, did they pick up the season right away in the fall again? Or were there more delays in starting that? Or how did that happen?

Sean Kato: So the Pac-12 had canceled all fall sports. I think they picked up football really late. I think it was just like early November. They didn't have anything so that was kind of a bummer. So I know it kind of went down and we were practicing, competing as much as we could, like within our team. Well, that was kind of a bummer, but so I had this really long stretch with no competitive golf again until we picked up the spring season in February.

Tom Cade: So you played in the U.S. Amateur Four Ball this past May, which was held at Chambers Bay, correct?

Sean Kato: Yeah. Yes, I did.

Tom Cade: And you had qualified for that back in the fall. Is that how that worked, if I remember right?

Sean Kato: Yeah, that's correct.

Tom Cade: And the other interesting thing about that is that you qualified with a partner of course, but your partner was not available to compete with you at the Four Ball. So you had to play solo, is that right?

Sean Kato: Yeah, that's right.

Tom Cade: Who was your partner?

Sean Kato: Jackson Lake. He's a teammate of mine at Oregon State.

Tom Cade: And he was not able to play because of a scheduling conflict?

Sean Kato: Yeah. I injured my shoulder back in February, so I was pretty much out a whole season, but my team, they played awesome. We have a really good team and the guys picked up the slack and they made it to nationals for the first time in, I think, 11 years, and Jackson was playing really well. So coach took him down to the nationals. It was just going to be too close for him, especially if we made match play, which obviously we were looking to do, but for me, I was just starting to swing again, so I was like, hey if I can play alone, I mean, why not? I played pretty good at The Home Course. And then kind of just struggled with my swing at Chamber.

The second day it got really windy the back nine. And it was really difficult mentally because you have to play it like a tournament. And then whereas the guys I'm playing with can just kind of be a bit more aggressive if they are both in play, and it was really hard mentally. That's probably the hardest place I could have been. Obviously, it would have been really cool to make match play, but it was a good learning experience and the golf courses were in great shape. So it was really fun.

Tom Cade: It's obviously in a Four Ball format and you're playing by yourself. You can't let down, you can't have a bad hole and think everything is going to be okay.

Sean Kato: Yeah exactly.

Tom Cade: It makes it very difficult. Okay. So back to Oregon State now, what year are you? What year of eligibility are you now?

Sean Kato: So I'm going into my third year of eligibility. But it's my fourth year in school, so I have two years left. I'm really looking forward to it. This year was hard for me. Obviously, we had a really good team and I wish I could have been there to help them do all nationals and post-season, but I believe that we have a really good team still and we can do the same thing next year.

Tom Cade: You said you had a shoulder injury. What happened with that? And are you healthy now?

Sean Kato: Yeah, so I played in Ironman, Hawaii. We were kind of messing around in the waves and it was funny because our coach was kind of like, all right, try to be careful. And I honestly was being pretty careful. It wasn't like that far in. A big wave took me under, threw back my shoulder, and I dislocated it. And I couldn't swing a club for about two months, like eight weeks probably. And so I was probably like, that put me late April where I first swung a full iron. It was kind of a bummer to get that taken away from me, but I think it really put a good perspective on life and sports. Golf's really important obviously, but I had to find a way to make do without competitive golf and even golf in general for two months. And I feel like I took a lot away from that.

Tom Cade: So next week, the Washington Men's Amateur Championships is being held at Gold Mountain, July 6th, 7th, and 8th, and you are the defending champion. Have you played Gold Mountain before?

Sean Kato: Yeah, I have several times. I play a lot of golf out there. Actually I won my age group in 2015 out there. I have a lot of good memories out there. I love the golf course. It's one of the best we have in the state. So I'm really excited to get out there and just really compete.

Tom Cade: Next week is the 100th playing of the Washington Men's Amateur. So it's kind of an historic year for that championship. We are in the process of gathering information for the Centennial of Washington Golf and during that research about it, we found out that the tournament actually was held during World War II, so suddenly we found out that the event was held continuously rather than having breaks in it. So this year actually is indeed the 100th playing of it. So to be on the trophy for this year is kind of a cool thing.

Sean Kato: Yeah that would be really awesome. I actually looked to see the last time someone won it back to back and it had been like, I think it was 1969. Yeah, that would be really cool.

Tom Cade: Yeah.

Sean Kato: But I'm going into the week like, I have little to no expectations, to be honest with you. I'm going to be okay if I miss the cut, if I win, if I get 10th, like I'm just so grateful and excited to compete and get back out there and play good golf.

Tom Cade: Yeah, absolutely. And yeah, you're correct. The last time that someone won back to back was 1968 and 1969, his name was Don Scott. And actually he is also the last person to have won the championship more than once, whether back-to-back or not. So it's been that long because so many young collegiate players have started to compete in the event for the last four decades and lots of really good players have come through.

Sean Kato: For sure, yeah.

Tom Cade: Well, Sean, I appreciate you taking the time this morning to talk about this and best of luck to you next week at the Amateur. And I'm sure we'll see you out there and from what it looks like the good weather is going to hold. So we're looking forward to a great week.

Sean Kato: Yeah, for sure. Yeah, I'm really excited. Thank you for having me this morning.

Tom Cade: Sean Kato of Redmond, Washington, the defending champion of the Washington Men's Amateur Championship. Thanks again, Sean.

Sean Kato: Yep. Thank you.

Tom Cade: Bye bye.

Sean Kato: Bye.