

A Love of Golf and the Utah Open

By Kurt Kragthorpe

Having your name attached to the historic Utah Open is worth some privileges. Teeing off any old time — without at least a two-stroke penalty — is not one of them.

Ned Siegfried has played enough golf to understand that, but he also figured his second-round starting time was slightly pushed back because of the previous day's rain delay in 2003, the first year of his law firm's title sponsorship.

Just to make sure, he called Alpine Country Club just as he was about to leave his house in Sandy. To his horror, he learned he was supposed to tee off in a half-hour.

So he raced into Utah County, found his playing partners waiting for him on the 10th tee after already having hit, hustled over and promptly shanked his opening shot with a mid-iron. He triple-bogeyed the hole, shot an 85 and lost everything he had achieved with an opening-round 72.

Oh, well. Siegfried keeps coming back. Make that Siegfried & Jensen, the sponsorship team that has helped save the Utah Open — now in its seventh year of their involvement, its fourth year of their title sponsorship and in its second year at TalonsCove.

Ned Siegfried and Mitch Jensen, the people, deflect such praise. But if Siegfried & Jensen, the law firm, gets some credit, that's OK with them.

That's because, as Siegfried says only half-kiddingly, law firms that specialize in representing accident victims are "probably a rung or two below used-car salesmen in most of the public's eye." He believes his practice is far more noble than is perceived. In any case, as the partner who focuses on marketing strategy, he was interested in giving back to the community and helping to improve the firm's image.

And if that means playing in every Utah Open pro-am event, well, that's OK.

It's actually draining, participating day after day in morning and afternoon pro-ams that tend to turn into long rounds. And then Siegfried and Jensen play in the tournament proper, posting individual scores under conditions that test Utah's top pros and amateurs. Siegfried jokes that he's so tired by Saturday afternoon that if he ever were in position to make the 36-hole cut, he'd intentionally whack a ball out of bounds.

His own limitations as a 5-handicap golfer usually take care of that issue, but there's no question that he loves golf. So does Jensen, although he's not quite as obsessed.

So when the Utah Section PGA took over administration of the tournament in 2000, the firm became one of the presenting sponsors.

The association went to another level in 2003, when the event moved from The Jeremy Golf & Country Club to Alpine and Siegfried & Jensen became the first title sponsor in Utah Open history.

The purse and the donation to Special Olympics Utah both keep increasing, thanks partly to the strategy Siegfried employs. He advertises extensively in the media, particularly on local television, and buys sponsorship packages with various professional sports teams. So when it comes to selling pro-am spots in the Utah Open, he uses a little, shall we say, leverage with those organizations. Hey, it's a good cause. Lots of fun, too.

"To me, it really just feels like I'm having a party with a bunch of good friends," Siegfried said. Because he attracts so many other sponsors, "I have an obligation to be here and make them feel comfortable."

Jensen feels the same way. He loves the pro-am experience, regardless of how well he plays. One of his best memories is playing in a group with his father, Hal, his son, Walker, and LaVell Edwards, his former football coach at BYU. He also played with Kim Thompson in the pro-am in 2001, the year Thompson ended up rallying to beat Brett Wayment at Jeremy — including a difficult, dramatic chip-in birdie on the 17th hole. Walker Jensen called that shot in advance, as improbable as it was.

Siegfried and Jensen will gladly present the oversized cardboard check to any winner, but they are especially thrilled when someone such as Thompson wins the tournament. They're highly supportive of Utah's club professionals.

Scott Whittaker, the Utah Section PGA's executive director, became acquainted with Siegfried while working as the longtime pro at Bountiful Ridge Golf Course. Whittaker figures that when he moved to the section office, Siegfried was eager to cash in on that friendship, knowing he could convince Whittaker to make the Utah Open an even bigger priority.

"It's an extensive undertaking for the staff and the membership," Whittaker said. "PGA members have stepped up."

Whittaker appreciates Siegfried and Jensen because they are genuinely interested in promoting Utah golf, beyond how their company benefits from the sponsorship. "They just care," he said.

And they also have embraced Special Olympics. Of course, that's difficult not to do, for anyone who has spent any time with the tournament volunteers. Siegfried and Jensen are unique sponsors, because they are so intimately involved in the tournament, not just delivering the winner's check. And Special Olympics Utah is a unique tournament charity, because its athletes work tirelessly as volunteers during tournament week.

It's a good match. "It really is a fun element of the tournament," Siegfried said.

"It's just really an added bonus. Going in, we had no idea that it would develop into such a big part of the tournament."

JD Donnelly, president and CEO of Special Olympics Utah, is hardly surprised to hear that reaction from Siegfried. He's accustomed to having folks with little or no previous exposure to his athletes develop friendships that are renewed each year. "Not only are they doing it financially, but they truly have Special Olympics in their hearts," Donnelly said.

Siegfried & Jensen (the law firm) and Ned & Mitch (the people) are in this to stay. They like how the tournament is growing while still emphasizing its Utah roots, they like where the sponsorship money is going and they love golf. Siegfried was intending to play in all six pro-am events this week at TalonsCove, and he was not looking for sympathy.

"How tough is that?" he said. "It's onerous, horrible, tough duty."

The lawyer was joking, in case you're wondering.

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