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O'Neill Ready For Another Tour Of Duty

Dan O'Neill missed the cut at the Senior U.S. Open on Friday after shooting rounds of 74 and 77. He missed the cut by two shots, but the Jamestown native doesn't have much time to dwell on that.

Playing in the Senior Open was a nice diversion in O'Neill's quest to play in some PGA Senior Tour events before attempting to earn his playing card for that tour at the qualifying school this fall. O'Neill couldn't go to the qualifying school last fall because he didn't turn 50, the minimum age for the Senior Tour, until March 21. So for now, the only way he can attempt to play in a tour event is to earn one of the four spots available at Monday qualifiers.

So this Monday he'll be in Michigan trying to qualify for the Farmers Charity Classic that begins Friday and this will be O'Neill's routine until the qualifying school in October. And if he makes it through qualifying school, it will be O'Neill's second experience on a pro golf tour.

O'Neill was on the PGA Tour for the last half of 1975, and all of 1976 and the first half of 1977.

"I've had the experience," He said. "I've been on the tour. I was out there for three years. I've played in those kinds of tournaments at that level before, but I haven't done real well at it."

So how long had he been thinking about a return this time to the Senior PGA Tour?

"Seriously for the last year-and-a-half, two years and it's probably because my golf game seemed to have progressively gotten better with age I guess, maturity," O'Neill said. "Not necessarily the striking of the ball, but being able to shoot a good score."

So he thinks his game is ready for tour golf again.

"The strongest point of my golf game has always been driving the ball, which is a very good part to be strong at," the former Penn State golfer said. "(My) irons have always been fair, short game used to be really good with the wedge. The putter wasn't good at all when I was on the tour. Now my putter is probably three times as good as it was. My irons are about the same as they've always been."

O'Neill's competitive golf for the past few years was mainly playing in Western New York PGA events every Monday.

"I probably played in 30 tournaments over the course of the summer here, I played quite a bit," said O'Neill, who shot a 2-under-par 70 to take senior honors at the Chautauqua Golf Club Pro-Am on Monday.

But "unfortunately," O'Neill, who owns Creekside Family Golf World, also began to practice a lot.

"Since I've had the range, I've spent a lot more time practicing, more than I ever had in the past," he said. "I never was a big practice. I never worked a lot on my golf swing. I've always had pretty much the same swing. I never worked on any major swing changes."

But he tried changes this past offseason.

"This winter I spent a lot of time working on my swing, I was trying to change my swing a little bit," O'Neill said.

"I said the heck with this," he said. "I got back into my mental visualization, forget about the swing, play the game, target golf, and pretty soon the scores started to come back down again."

So with his old swing and his 50th birthday coming up on March 21, O'Neill was ready to try the PGA Senior Tour.

"That is the ultimate goal, to get to that (qualifying) school and try to get your card," he said.

But that doesn't start until October, so O'Neill said, "The option now is to get out there to try to qualify on Monday."

That involves plunking down \$200 to \$300 to play in Monday qualifiers, which are not at the tournament course, and hope to earn one of four openings into the event. So far O'Neill has tried it twice and failed to qualify, but he didn't miss by much.

The first was at the NFL Golf Classic at Clifton, NJ, where he shot a 70. Four 69s qualified.

"I just had a terrible start," O'Neill said. "The key is getting to the tournament.

And when qualifiers get to the actual tournament, they find things are easier. O'Neill was told by one Senior Tour qualifier, "If you shot 2-under on this golf course (for the qualifier), you'll shoot 10-under on the tournament course."

And the big advantage is that the Senior Tour doesn't have a cut, so all the golfers will earn money.

It is “the last-place player could conceivably shoot three 85s and win about \$1,000,” O’Neill said. “So you almost pay your expenses for a week if you just get in the tournament.”

But he added, “There’s no exemption for the next week’s tournament, so Sunday night you’ve got to get to the next qualifier for Monday morning. So the logistics are mind-boggling trying to figure it out, but we’ve got a pretty good schedule and program going.”

This week O’Neill took a “break” by playing in the U.S. Senior Open, which he qualified for two weeks ago at Lockport by shooting 4-under 69 to earn the lone spot available. But now he’s done with the Senior Open, which was in Salem, Mass. and O’Neill is headed to Ada, Mich., to take part in Monday’s qualifier for the Farmers Charity Classic.

“I’ve got it all mapped,” he said. “I’m going to every one I can go to before the (qualifying) school.”

And how long does he plan to keep pursuing a spot on the Senior Tour?

“From the information I can get from the guys that are out there, it’s probably realistically a five-to-six-year window as to where you have the ability to be competitive at that level,” he said. “After that they see it dropping off, age 56, 57, that’s when it starts to go. So the overall look is that five-to-six-year window and hopefully things can progress through that time and I can go that long and be successful.