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FEATURED

After stellar golf career, McKnight now teaching the game at Farmington

BY JERRY RATCLIFFE Apr 20, 2017



Ryan M. Kelly

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Former Champions Tour golfer Tom McKnight is now a teaching pro at Farmington Country Club. Photo/Ryan M. Kelly/The Daily Progress

There was a time when Tom McKnight thought his golf career might be over.

Thirty-seven years later, he can look back over a storied lifework and thank the heavens for his good fortune. The Galax native, who became one of Virginia's most feared amateurs, then carved out a reputation on the Champions Tour at age 50, is now occupied with giving back to the game that he loves so dearly.

McKnight, who graduated from UVA in 1976, has returned to Charlottesville as one of the teaching pros for Farmington's director of golf, Rob McNamara. The two have been close friends for decades.

Three weeks into his move from Hilton Head, South Carolina, where he spent the past 18 years, McKnight is loving the transition to Charlottesville.

Sitting in the shade a few yards from Farmington's first tee on a perfect spring day, he surveyed the moment.

"Doesn't get much better than this," McKnight smiled.

Surely that wasn't the case in 1980 when the young golfer was horsing around a basketball court and broke his arm. Doctors told him he might not ever play golf again. After eight months of rehab, McKnight returned to the practice range and was capable of hitting the ball a mere 150 yards with a 30-yard slice.

Like any champion, he wasn't about to give up. Four years later, McKnight won the first of three Virginia State Amateur titles by defeating Mike Pratt, 4 and 3, at Petersburg Country Club. He repeated the next year, downing J.P. Leigh in Fairfax, then pulled off yet another crown in '89 by defeating the state's premier amateur, Vinny Giles, at the Country Club of Virginia.

He also picked up a Virginia State Open championship in 1985 at Farmington to go along with a pair of runner-up finishes in the event in '82 and '93. He was low amateur on five other occasions.

"Coming back after that [broken arm] and winning my first state amateur was a huge boost of confidence," McKnight said.

He didn't slow down from that point until a couple of years ago when back pain forced him to take another path. That's when McNamara called.

"When Rob found out I was teaching, he said that Farmington was opening a new facility and that he'd love to have me up here," McKnight said.

Now he's giving lessons daily to golfers of all skill levels, and loving every minute.

For McNamara, bringing McKnight to Farmington was a prayer answered. He was in need of another good teacher, and had a rapport with McKnight that dated back to when they were just starting out in golf.

"I met Tom in 1983 and we've been friends ever since," McNamara said.

The two were paired at the prestigious Sunnehanna Amateur in 1983. Seventeen-year-old high school senior McNamara had just become the youngest player to qualify for the U.S. Open (which would be held the next week at Oakmont). McKnight was attempting to kick-start his career.

"On the first day, the first shot Tom hit was on a par-3, and the ball flew in the hole, hit and destroyed the cup liner," McNamara recalled. "The ball came out and rolled off the green."

They've been pals ever since, with McKnight playing in Farmington's Kenridge when his schedule allowed. The two traveled and played together. McNamara helped with McKnight's game. Now, he's his pal's boss.

"That's a weird deal, being his boss," McNamara said. "We've got a lot to be excited about with Tom on board. We're going to laugh and giggle the whole way. We feel like a couple of the Seven Dwarfs, whistle while we work. I'm Dopey, Sleepy, and Grumpy. Tom's Happy and Doc."

McNamara couldn't have asked for a better situation. McKnight knows golf, amateur and professional. He's felt the heat of the battle against the likes of Palmer, Crenshaw, Watson, Kite, Langer and Stockton.

McKnight, who met his wife of 40 years, Vita, while he was attending UVa, has lots of ties to the area. Two of his three kids also went to Virginia. Several friends reside in Charlottesville.

"I told Vita that if we were ever going to move north of Hilton Head, the only place I would think about was Charlottesville," McKnight said.

Now, he hopes to share his knowledge with area golfers. What a terrific source of knowledge that should be.

McKnight's shining moments as an amateur came in 1998 when he defeated a young Spaniard, Sergio Garcia, in the semifinals of the U.S. Amateur at Oak Hill before losing to long-hitting Hank Kuehne in the finals (Kuehne defeated Matt Kuchar in the semis).

"I guess Sergio finally got over that loss," McKnight chuckled in reference to Garcia winning his first major (the Masters) a few weeks ago. "I was glad to see him win the Masters. Those were special years for me and my family."

Finishing runner-up in the U.S. Am earned the 44-year-old McKnight a spot in the Masters and in the U.S. Open, and served as momentum for an eventual professional career. He had told friends that he would never attend a Masters until he was able to play in the tournament.



"It was worth the wait," he said.

He always had his eye on the Senior Tour (now Champions), so at age 47, bided his time on some mini tours like the Hooters, where most of his competitors were the same age as his kids. Once he turned 50, he qualified for the Senior Tour and played on the circuit until 2010.

"It was a great chapter of my life," he said.

McKnight made 107 cuts in 111 events, had 33 top 25 finishes and earned close to \$2 million.

"I had some real highs and lows," he said. "I went out there thinking that I might go into a player's dining room and there'd be five guys at one table, and I'd be over there by myself, guys thinking 'What's this guy doing here? He didn't play the regular tour.' That kind of thing."

Wasn't the case at all. Players welcomed him with open arms, showed him respect. He's great friends with several of them still, particularly Stockton, and PGA Tour member Kucher, whom McKnight was texting this week.

While he never won a Champions tournament, he came oh so close several times, something that haunts him still.

"I hate that I never won out there because I felt like I played good enough to win," McKnight said. "I really wanted to play a few more years because I knew I could have won."

Perhaps the biggest sting was a blown lead in one of the majors, where he owned a one-shot lead with four holes to play. He finished third.

"One bad shot cost me the tournament," he said.

Such is professional golf. McKnight was quick to point out that in amateur golf, a final round leader might be able to survive merely by posting pars down the home stretch, maybe throwing in a birdie. Not so in the pros.

"They're not backing up," McKnight said. "There are so many good players that somebody is going to make something happen, and it better be you if you want to win. If you stumble just a little bit, there's a bunch of guys ready to fly by."

With those days in the rear view mirror, McKnight said coming to Farmington is a chance to give back to golf, to bring smiles to those seeking to improve their games, no matter the age or skill. He can connect to those smiles on a different level, but it means the same.

"We're so happy to have Tom here now," McNamara said. "He's a definite future member of the Virginia Golf Hall of Fame. He's here to help as many people as he can. He can walk with kings and keep a common touch."

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