

SPORTS

Home > Today's Paper > Sports

 Sports RSS Feed  Print Story  E-mail Story

Q and A with golfer John Balfanz

BY ROBERT GAUTNEY | Tuesday, Aug 28 2007 9:05 AM

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As a young boy, John Balfanz used to play golf with his dad on weekends at Stockdale Country Club. But the game was just an activity back then. The score wasn't important. It took a back seat to time spent with his dad and trying to see just how far he could hit the ball.

PHOTOS:



Photo by Henry A. Barrios

Henry A. Barrios / The Californian John Balfanz
Baseball was John's passion. A youth, high school and college star, Balfanz was drafted by the St. Louis Cardinals in the 13th round of the 1987 MLB Draft after a record-setting career at Cal State Northridge. But after three years of pro ball, a broken ankle sent Balfanz back home to Bakersfield, where he started a successful home building business.



Photo by Henry A. Barrios

John Balfanz follows his shot at the Seven Oaks driving range.

But Balfanz missed the competitive aspect of baseball, so the left-hand-hitting slugger went back to his youth, to the game of golf, albeit right-handed, to quench his thirst for competition.

What followed has been one the the top local amateur golf careers in Kern County, and, at 41, Balfanz is still hitting it a long way and hopes that there is still more to come. Last month, Balfanz won his record fourth Bakersfield City Amateur Championship, shooting a record-tying 7-under 65 in the opening round on the way to a 9-under total and a win in a playoff.

You've had quite a distinguished amateur career, especially locally. Do you think your baseball background helped you become an accomplished player?

"Most people would say yes, but with me, it didn't really help much, except for maybe the hand-eye aspect. I hit left-handed in baseball, so I didn't really carry any of that over to playing golf right-handed. I was a 12 handicapper when I left baseball, but I just worked hard on my game."

Speaking of baseball, you must have had a pretty good career at Cal State Northridge to have been selected in the 13th round of the MLB Draft. Any notable accomplishments?

"When I left, I held the career record for most home runs with 45 and the career base on balls record. But I also held the record for the most career strikeouts, too! But they've all been broken since."

Describe your professional baseball career.

"Too short! I played two years in the minors with the Cardinals, then was sent to the independent Reno Silver Sox of the Cal League in 1989. It was my best year, though. I made the Cal League Northern All-Stars, but in the first game after the All-Star break, I broke my ankle. I came home to Bakersfield and starting building homes, and that was the end of my baseball career."

Do you remember the first home that you built?

"Yeah, it was in North Olive Estates. I actually started building it in the off-season in early 1989. When I came home from baseball, I finished it, but I couldn't sell it. It was during a market down (period), so I moved into the house. But, I got two pre-sales from an open house and the rest, as they say, is history."

You just won your record fourth Bakersfield City Amateur title last month. You also have a record-tying four Kern County Amateur titles, as well. Do you think you are the best local amateur golfer in history?

"Oh, I can't believe you would ask me that! That's a question that's best left answered by everyone else. There have been a lot of great local amateurs, like Arnold Kirschenmann and Bud Ardell, to name just a couple. And there were a lot during the '50s and '60s, too. But I guess if you are going by local titles, I'd have to be right up there."

Who is the best player that you have ever played with?

"I was in the final group of the Santa Barbara City Amateur with Jason Gore the same year he won the California State Amateur. He was the most impressive player that I've played against."

You are playing in a USGA Mid-Amateur sectional qualifier Monday. Have you had much success playing away from Bakersfield?

"A little. I've qualified for the (California) State Amateur a handful of times and made it to match play and I qualified for the U.S. Amateur at Baltusrol in 2000. I've also had a handful of top-five and (top-)10 finishes in Southern Cal and Northern Cal events, but most of that took place from 1996-2001 when I had more time to work on my game."

Local golf has really risen with many more talented players than, say, 10 years ago. What do you attribute that to?

"The influx of Tiger Woods, for one, and the (Cal State Bakersfield) golf team has brought talented players to Bakersfield who have stayed around to make Bakersfield their home."

Speaking of those young guys, would you rather beat them or do you still get a kick out of beating the "old guard?"

"I just like to compete and I like to win. I still like beating the guys my age, but with so many talented young players around now, if you win a City or County tournament, then you know you've played pretty darn well."

At 41, any aspirations of playing on the Champions Tour?

"It's come to my mind, but that's about it. All of the travel and living in hotels doesn't seem like a lot of fun. I used to like that when I played pro ball, but I think it would take the fun out of the game. It would be more like a grind, a job. I already have a job that I enjoy. And besides, I don't think people realize just how good those guys are!"

Ten years from now, what do you hoped to have accomplished in golf?

"I would like to win as many City and County Amateurs as possible, and I would really like to win out of town in SCGA, NCGA, CGA an USGA events. I think the Mid-amateurs are my best chance."

Age: 41

Family: Wife, Carrie; children, Jacob (15), Justin (13), Karson (8), Cathrine (6)

Profession: Owner, John Balfanz Custom Homes

Sport: Golf

Home courses: Stockdale and Seven Oaks country clubs

Index: Plus-2

Club titles: 4

Lowest career round: 63 at Newport Beach Country Club in 2000

Career holes-in-one: 2

Favorite course played: Pebble Beach

Childhood heroes: George Brett and Steve Garvey

Dream fivesome: Tiger Woods, Ernie Els, Fred Couples and Davis Love

Other sports passions: Snow skiing

— Source: John Balfanz