

The need for Speed

No limit for talented speed golfer

by Jeff Shelley

Of all the people who golf in the Northwest, Christopher Smith is certainly not one who slows up play. Indeed, the lead instructor at Pumpkin Ridge Golf Club in North Plains, Ore., is the reigning world-record holder in the still-esoteric sport of speed golf.

In October 2005, Smith shot an amazing five-under-par 65 in 44 minutes and 6 seconds, setting the lowest-ever speed golf score of 109.06 (golf score combined with the time it takes to play 18 holes). His record was set at the 5,500-yard Jackson Park Golf Course in south Chicago.

Smith says of that round: "The course was not in the best of shape, with very ragged greens that were difficult to putt. My round proved to be very eventful, with six birdies, two eagles, three bogies, a double-bogey and six pars – never a dull moment that day."

The 44-year-old Smith grew up in America's unofficial track and field capital of Eugene, watching Steve Prefontaine and Alberto Salazar run for international glory, Bill Bowerman (co-founder of Nike) coach, and the Olympic Trials take place at the University of Oregon's fabled Hayward Field. He didn't take up running until later. "I really only started running seriously once I left Eugene after high school, but I may have had a bit of it in my blood from growing up there."



Christopher Smith coming down the 18th fairway at Chicago's Jackson Park Golf course on his way to setting the world record.

He now runs regularly, logging 20-30 miles a week, and does a fair amount of interval training in those miles. "Whenever possible, I play speed golf, either first thing in the morning or late in the evening. Obviously, there can't be anyone in front of me when playing, which makes practicing challenging."

The small assortment of clubs he uses in speed golf competitions extends to regular tournaments. "Last year at the Oregon Open at Eagle Crest Resort, I lost on the third hole of a playoff for the championship after shooting 11-under par for 54 holes – playing with only nine clubs."

He has accrued some eye-popping speed golf scores at his home course, Ghost Creek at Pumpkin Ridge. "My best performances at Ghost Creek are a 66 in 48 1/2 minutes with six clubs, and a 30 on the back nine in a little more than 23 minutes. I once shot a two-over par 37 on the back nine in 18 1/2 minutes playing with just a 5-iron. I've had numerous other rounds on Ghost under par, in 50-55 minutes, always playing with just six clubs."

Smith fired a one-over-par 73 in 42 1/2 minutes during the 2001 Fred Meyer Challenge at The Reserve Golf and Vineyards, in Aloha, Ore. The course measured nearly 7,200 yards. "The most amazing round of golf I've ever seen," remarked T.J. Lambert, director of programming at the time for ESPN Radio.

The six clubs in his bag during speed golf competitions are a driver, 4-wood, 5- and 8-iron, gap wedge and putter.

Smith has also earned several impressive honors for his "regular job" at Pumpkin Ridge. He's a past Oregon Chapter and Pacific Northwest Section PGA Teacher of the Year, a Master Instructor with the Jim McLean Golf Schools, and was nominated in 2006 by Golf Magazine as one of the top 100 instructors in America.

Smith adds that he enjoys conducting speed golf exhibitions. One recent outing took him to the historic Greenbrier Resort in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va. At the facility's private course, the Greenbrier Sporting Club, one he termed "pretty hard," he shot 1-over par in 30 minutes for nine holes. "I

was followed by about 50 members in carts. I'd say before taking a shot, 'Well, let me take a few practice swings' . . . then say, 'No, let's go ahead and hit it.' They loved it."

His home base has been a big backer of his speed golf efforts. "Pumpkin Ridge has been very supportive in allowing me to practice whenever appropriate and giving me the freedom to compete and conduct speed golf demos and exhibitions," Smith said. "As an instructor, my colleague Jerry Mowlds has been a great mentor for me."

Smith figures that one of these days the record in Chicago will fall, perhaps by his good friend Tim Scott, now a school teacher in Bend, Ore. "I think the mark is breakable," he said. "The better one plays, the less time one takes. So, given a reasonable fitness level, good playing and the right conditions, the record could go down."

He strongly believes the principles of speed golf, which he employs in his teaching, would help average players, who tend to overanalyze each shot. "I have begun to do more and more speed golf exhibitions, primarily to send the message that you don't have to play slowly to play well. Speed golf is an extreme version of playing a little faster and, with slow play driving many people out of the game, it is important for golfers to realize that playing in 5 1/2 hours will not improve performance."

To help promote these concepts, in September Smith and publisher Crown/Random House will release his book, *I've Got 99 Swing Thoughts but Hit the Ball Ain't One*. He also recently launched a new website, www.christophersmithgolf.com.

"The book focuses on how playing faster and less consciously can improve golf performance," he says. "Once the skill of striking a golf ball has been learned – and yes, this takes time – consciously thinking about 'how' to swing the golf club is hugely detrimental. Speed golf in many ways, other than the physical demands, is much easier than traditional golf because it forces the golfer to simply react to the shot and situation at hand and play more instinctively."

For those of you who are slow to pull the trigger, maybe Christopher Smith's book will be just the ticket. *

Jeff Shelley has authored three editions of the book, Golf Courses of the Pacific Northwest. He co-founded the Northwest Golf Media Association and regularly contributes to the Evans Scholarship Program, Washington Junior Golf Association, and other golf-related charities and organizations.

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