

Always On the Go: A Speed Golf world-record holder, Christopher Smith stresses fast play with students

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Call it perhaps a centrifugal force that swung Christopher Smith toward his unique involvement with Speed Golf. When learning about Smith, a PGA teaching professional at Pumpkin Ridge Golf Club's Ghost Creek Course in North Plains, Ore., one could ask: Is he a PGA Professional trapped in a runner's body or vice versa? Smith will tell you he believes it is the former.

Considering that Smith is a native Oregonian who grew up in Eugene, a hot spot for runners, it would be easy to see why he'd be a likely candidate to regularly lace up a pair of Nikes for a four-mile trail run. But Smith says, "Running wasn't something I did as a younger person competitively, or really even at all. I think I actually started running mostly when I got out of high school and left Eugene."

Smith, 43, will point out, however, because of the culture in Eugene it's easy to be caught up in the track and field world. As a fan he attended the Steve Prefontaine Classic, one of the great collegiate track and field meets the University of Oregon hosts each spring. In fact, Smith recalls watching Prefontaine run before a one-car accident in 1975 claimed the life of one of the world's greatest long distance runners ever at the age of 24.

Smith admits he's a bit off-center, though there isn't anything illogical about his interest in Speed Golf. It's almost like an excerpt from an elementary school storybook:

Christopher likes running.

Christopher likes golf.

Christopher hates slow play.

Juxtapose those three statements and you have what Smith calls more than a hobby. It is a passion of his that continues to grow.

To give you an idea of the sport of Speed Golf, imagine an Olympics biathlete who, instead of racing on skis and carrying a rifle, is on a pair of running shoes carrying a specially designed Speed Golf bag containing six clubs.

"You're doing something that's very cardio, running," Smith says. "Then you have to stop and perform, as anybody knows as a golfer, an extremely precise motor movement in a golf swing."

Smith didn't start out alone. He and his buddy Tim Scott have much in common, and in the late 1990s both were PGA Professionals, at Broadmoor in Portland at the time. Like Smith, Scott also grew up in Eugene and had taken up running. So when they uncovered an article in Runners World magazine about Speed Golf competition, it was as if they found their calling. Scott is no longer employed in the golf industry, but he continues to play with Smith in some of their favorite Speed Golf events.

One of them is in Chicago. In October of 2005, Smith set a world record at the Chicago Speed Golf Classic held at Jackson Park Golf Course, a 5,463-yard layout. He shot a 5-under-par 65 in 44 minutes. Like in stroke play, the lowest score wins, and is comprised of the 18-hole score plus the time it took to play.

According to Jeff Ellison, the executive director of the Pacific Northwest PGA Section, the principles of Speed Golf are carried over to Smith's lessons at Ghost Creek. "He (Smith) uses it in his teachings a little bit to get people to be a little bit more reactive to their game and play it a little more naturally. Trying to avoid essentially the paralysis by analysis kind of idea."

Increasingly, Smith is getting booked for Speed Golf exhibitions, but he'll flat out tell you it will never become a sport for the masses. Instead Smith hopes to convey a more important message for the game of golf through his Speed Golf demonstrations. "What I really use it for now is a conduit or a showcase for people to see that you don't have to play slowly to play well," says Smith, who finished second at the 2006 Oregon Open Speed Golf Invitational.

An elementary lesson that Smith hopes has an impact with others on the golf course.