

Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles, Calif.: Mar 8, 2001. Valley Edition, pg. D.9

By *Mike Bresnahan*

VALLEY / VENTURA COUNTY SPORTS; SENIOR PGA NOTEBOOK; Muarry Turns Heads at Senior Tournament;

Officials at the registration desk at the SBC Senior Classic could hardly control themselves. You're not 50, they thought as Darren Muarry checked in. No way.

Muarry didn't mind the startled looks. He's used to them. His strapping physique turns heads almost as often as his unique style of play. A lifelong caddy who will play his first PGA Senior Tour event at Valencia Country Club on Friday, Muarry drills the ball nearly 300 yards, straight as an arrow . . . with a cross-handed grip. One of four golfers to earn sponsor exemptions this week, Muarry, who turned 50 in January--go ahead, check his I.D.--can't remember not hitting with his hands crossed.

"I always thought I was doing it the right way, until people started telling me otherwise at the golf course," said Muarry, who learned the game of golf, and the grip, from his parents. "Even I don't know why I hit the ball like I do. I aim 50 yards right, but the ball ends up straight."

Muarry's path to the senior tour has been anything but linear.

He caddied on the LPGA Tour for 12 years and moved from Augusta, Ga., to Los Angeles last year in order to more closely pursue his dream of playing on the PGA Senior Tour.

Muarry got a job as a caddie at Wilshire Country Club and caught the eye of Todd Ellston, a member of the club and an investment banker.

Ellston asked Muarry to play and was stunned to see him shoot one-under-par 70 from the back tees at L.A. Country Club's North course, which measures 6,909 yards.

"It should have been a 65, but he missed some putts," Ellston said. "He didn't miss a fairway. And that's on a course he'd never really seen before."

Ellston and his father agreed to finance Muarry's attempt to make the PGA Senior Tour. Muarry quit his job as a caddy three months ago. Now he's attracting small crowds with every cross-handed drive on the range.

"I guess there's more than one way to skin a cat," Raymond Floyd said.

Muarry, a 6-foot, 210-pounder, runs 10-12 miles a day. He bench presses 400 pounds and hits 700 balls on a slow day.

This is a good week for him. He was granted an exemption even though he isn't a Senior PGA Tour associate. He caddied for Laura Woods, an SBC official, at last year's SBC at Wilshire, and made a favorable impression.

"Darren is familiar to one of our executives and that's why we gave him serious consideration," tournament director Brian Fitzgerald said. "Darren's a pretty good player, but his personality did more for his chances of getting an exemption than his playing ability."

The future will be more challenging for Muarry. He is allowed only two more exemptions on the Senior Tour this year unless he wins a tournament, which would allow him to play exempt-free for one calendar year.

Otherwise, he must make the final cut at national qualifying school in December to become a Senior PGA Tour associate.

Until then, he'll lobby for his final two exemptions. And try to qualify on a weekly basis during open qualifying on Mondays.

Fine with him. His swing, though unorthodox, is working. He's getting some playing time on the PGA Senior Tour.

Life is good for the former caddy.

Tournament officials breathed a sigh of relief when the sun came out Wednesday. The rainwater from the last few days evaporated, with the exception of a few spots on the course. "It's handled the rain very well," Floyd said. "It's going to be a top-notch tournament."

Floyd, who played the par-72 course for the first time Wednesday, said its 6,905-yard length will be more of a factor than soggy greens or fairways. It's a far cry from quaint Wilshire, where the tournament was held the last six years. "Wilshire was the kind of course that was fun to play because it wasn't about length at all," Floyd said. "This golf course is going to require some length. There are some long par fours and par threes." Floyd's team won the pro-am tournament Wednesday at 19-under-par 53.

Rocky Thompson's team finished second at 54.

Tom Jenkins and Don Bies tied for individual honors at 67.

Jim Colbert, Hale Irwin and Bob Gilder tied for third with 68.

ISSN/ISBN: 04583035

Copyright (c) 2001 Los Angeles Times