

The doctor is in

The Oklahoma Golf Hall of Fame, that is

BY JOHN ROHDE

The 50-and-older professional circuit is named the Champions Tour and Gil Morgan needed just two appearances to prove himself worthy of the billing.

Morgan turned 50 on Sept. 25, 1996, and 11 days later on Oct. 6 claimed his first Champions Tour victory by winning the Ralphs Senior Classic. For five years, Morgan reigned as the youngest senior tour champion before being edged out by Bobby Wadkins at 50 years, 10 days. Mark Weibe eventually tied Wadkins' record.

Because Morgan's eligibility came late in the 1996 season, he would have to wait to be named the senior tour's Rookie of the Year in 1997.

This inaugural Oklahoma Golf Hall of Fame inductee would remain a fixture on the senior tour leaderboard well into his 60s. Only Hale Irwin (45) and Lee Trevino

(29) have won more Champions Tour events than Oklahoma's favorite non-practicing optometrist.

No telling how gargantuan Morgan's career numbers might have become had his entire career not been saddled with chronic injury problems. Even more unfortunate was this We-woka native being born one year after Irwin.

As a member of the Champions Tour, Morgan has 25 first-place finishes, 27 second-place finishes and 25 third-place finishes, yet they pale in comparison to Irwin's career trifecta of 45-43-23.

"Forty-five wins," Morgan said of Irwin. "That's a bunch of wins."

From 1996-2009, Morgan had 158 top-10 finishes. In that same time span, Irwin had 185.

Though Morgan is No. 2 in career earnings on the Champions Tour with more than \$20.5 million, he never won an Arnold Palmer Award as the tour's leading money winner for a season. Irwin won the award five times.

Though Morgan is No. 3 in career victories on the Champions Tour, he never won a Jack Nicklaus Award for Player of the Year. Irwin won the award three times.

However, Morgan was able to win back-to-back Byron Nelson Awards (2000-01) for the tour's low scoring average and he is still the only senior to win four straight All-Around statistical titles.

Irwin has the most career top-10



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Photo courtesy PGA Tour

One of 25 victory waves for Gil Morgan on the Champions Tour.



Photo courtesy PGA Tour

Gil Morgan poses with the trophy after winning the SBC Classic on March 14, 2004 at the Valencia Country Club in Valencia, California.

seasons on the Champions Tour's money list with 12. Morgan is second on that list with nine and finished 11th and 13th in two other seasons.

Morgan has finished second to Irwin six times on the senior tour, as has Irwin to Morgan.

"It seemed like a pretty good rivalry at the time," Morgan said of dueling Irwin. "The first two or three years were pretty competitive. It was kind of interesting. I think we both fed off of that somewhat."

A former two-time All-Big Eight cornerback (1965-66), two-time Big Eight golf medalist (1966-67) and the individ-

ual NCAA golf champion (1967) while at the University of Colorado, the uber-competitive Irwin was not the most popular player on tour. Morgan, meanwhile, actually might have been.

In their first five full seasons together on the Champions Tour, Irwin (28 victories) and Morgan (19) combined to win an astounding 47 tournaments.

The tandem was so dominant, the 1998 MasterCard Championship did have enough tour pros to fill its Pro-Am event. At that time, the field was comprised of Champions Tour winners from the previous season and, thanks to Morgan and Irwin, there were only 19 qualifiers from the tour's 38 official events held the previous year. Local club pros in Hawaii had to be used to fill out the field.

From 2000-2004, fellow Oak Tree touring pro Doug Tewell managed to win the same number of tournaments as Morgan, each winning eight times. Tewell's victory list included two major titles with the 2000 Senior PGA Championship, which he won by seven strokes in a 54-hole event, and also the 2001 Tradition, which he won by nine strokes over 72 holes.

Tewell said he has long had great respect for Morgan, with whom he frequently leased private jet time together.

"I have made this statement so many times," Tewell said, "but Gil Morgan is the most unappreciated star of the PGA Tour and



Photo by Getty Images

Gil Morgan waits to putt during the 1983 Masters Tournament at Augusta National Golf Club in April 1983 in Augusta, Georgia.

the Champions Tour. I mean, he really is.

"He didn't get the notoriety that I felt like he should have. I don't think it bothered Gil, at least not outwardly, but he is so much better than many of the guys who were getting huge publicity. I mean, what a career."

A rivalry between Irwin and Morgan brewed early. Thanks to Morgan being Mr. Nice Guy, the combativeness never reached a boiling point, though Irwin did refuse Morgan's invitations to team up in a Legends event that didn't count toward official money.

Morgan instead paired up with Hubert Green, and won.

"We got along pretty well,"



Yes, we all wore pants like that in 1979.

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Morgan said of Irwin. “I probably made a concerted effort to try to be congenial through that whole deal. A lot of the players really weren’t that keen on Hale individually. He was so competitive at the time. A lot of the players came up to me and said, ‘Boy, I sure hope you win this week,’ but we still had a pretty cordial relationship.”

Tewell said he always got along with Irwin, who affectionately was referred to as “Hale Ir-whine” because he was so tough on himself.

“I didn’t dislike Hale by any means.” Tewell said. “He’s a great player. He’s a great athlete, and I’m sure his Colorado days had a lot to do with that. Hale was phenomenal and I felt bad for Gil. I’d tell him, ‘You’re playing your butt off, but this guy (Irwin) is just having phenomenal times.’ ”

Morgan was Mr. Congeniality, but he also had a competitive side.

Tewell laughed as he shared what transpired after the 2000 Norvell Utah Showdown in Park City, a tournament Morgan had won two years earlier. In the final round, Tewell eagled the par-5 17th while Morgan birdied. Morgan then bogeyed the 18th to finish in second place, two shots behind Tewell.

Morgan and Tewell normally flew home together, but Tewell had to fly to another tournament. Tewell had been sent a new golf bag and asked Morgan if he would mind taking the old bag back with him to Oklahoma. Morgan obliged and when Tewell returned home, he phoned Morgan.

Tewell: “Hey, I’m back. I’ll come over

and get that bag.”

Morgan: “You’re not going to want it.”

Tewell: “What do you mean I’m not going to want it?”

Morgan: “I was so pissed off after you beat me, I ran over it three times in the parking lot.”

“So, you see, Gil does have humor,” Tewell said, still chuckling.

Neither Morgan nor Irwin has won a Champions Tour event since 2007.

“We’re both kind of under the wind now in terms of being competitive against the field,” said Morgan, who currently averages just 12 stops per year with no major appearances.

Morgan’s last victory came three weeks shy of his 61st birthday, while Irwin’s came when he was 61½.

“We both had careers that were probably longer than they should have been compared to the field,” Morgan said. “Most of the (senior) guys have got a five-year window maybe. We both played 10 years, plus at a pretty high level.”

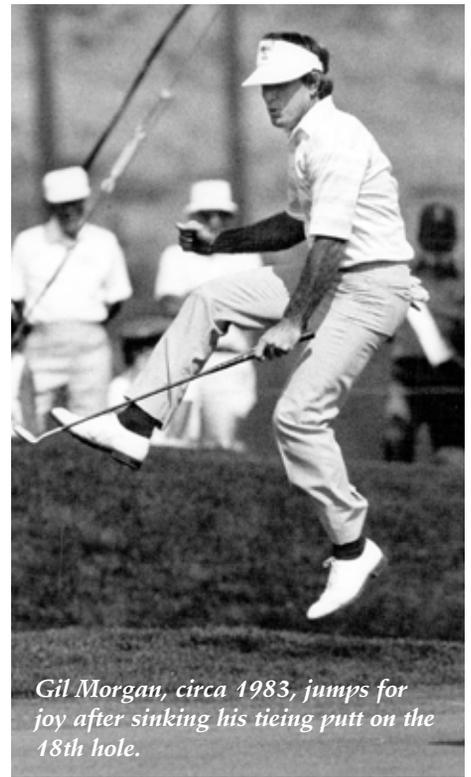
Morgan claimed three major titles on the Champions Tour, winning The Tradition back-to-back in 1997-98 and the 1998 Ford Senior Players Championship.

“They’re too much work. They’re no fun anymore,” Morgan said of competing in majors. “It’s not any fun going out there missing the cut. That gets old pretty quick when you’re spending all that money and not making any.”

Morgan’s name is scattered throughout the Champions Tour record book. His 12 consecutive seasons of at least \$1 million in earnings is still a record. Morgan’s 19-under-par total after the first two rounds of the 2006 MasterCard Championship in Hawaii remains the 36-hole record for any tournament. His run of 31 consecutive under-par rounds in 2000 is still a record and his stretch of 26 consecutive under-par rounds in 1997 ranks third.

Morgan’s career success certainly didn’t begin and end in the 50-and-older group. He displayed the same consistency in 24-plus seasons on the PGA Tour with 21 career second-place finishes, 21 third-place finishes and 119 top-10s.

In PGA Tour major championships: Morgan tied for third and led after two rounds in the 1984 Masters; he finished third in the 1983 U.S. Open at Oakmont and was the second-round leader in the 1992 U.S. Open at Pebble Beach, where he became the first player in U.S. Open history to reach double-digits under-par;



Gil Morgan, circa 1983, jumps for joy after sinking his tying putt on the 18th hole.

Photo by Getty Images

he had four top-10s in the PGA Championship, which included placing third twice (1980, 1990); and he tied for 10th at Muirfield in the 1980 British Open, an event he entered just seven times.

During his PGA Tour days, Morgan’s golf prowess resembled a “Jack of All Trades,” but he was a master of none. Though Morgan won seven PGA tournaments, that total could have – and perhaps should have – been considerably higher.

Morgan didn’t stray from the fairway often, but when he did, it cost him strokes. Morgan blames his short game.

“I think it was all about my putting, honestly,” Morgan said of not collecting more PGA Tour wins. “I always felt like I was pretty good tee-to-green, but if I got out of the fairway or missed a green, my chipping and putting were not as good as the top players at that time.”

Despite enduring persistent physical ailments in five different decades – including neck, knee, back, wrist, elbow and arm – Morgan somehow was able to retain a fluid swing that has long been the envy of tour players young and old.

On the night of Oct. 25 at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Dr. Gilmer Bryan Morgan II and that velvet swing of his will become inaugural members of the Oklahoma Golf Hall of Fame.

John Rohde is cohost on 107.7 The Franchise. Steely, Lump and Rohde; 5:30-9 a.m. Monday through Friday.



Always happy to sign for the fans.