True Grit

Glasson overcame odds, injuries to earn spot in Oklahoma Golf Hall of Fame

BY JOHN ROHDE

Before a scrawny Tiger Woods transformed his body with a highly classified training regimen and prior to Brooks Koepka climbing the depth chart at linebacker, a chronically chiseled Bill Glasson was the most physically imposing figure on the PGA Tour.

"He was built like Atlas," said Tom Jones, a four-time All-American at Oklahoma State who serves as chairman of the Oklahoma Golf Hall of Fame. "There were trim and well-built players on Tour back then, but nobody was built like Bill."

Longtime Oral Roberts and Tulsa golf coach Bill Brogden said Glasson "was an athlete and could do about what he wanted to do. He looked like a defensive back. Man, he was strong."

ORU athletic director Mike Carter insisted Glasson "looked like Popeye with those forearms."

College teammates Joey Rassett, Jim Kane and Bryan Norton marveled at Glasson's overall athleticism.

"He was just a lot stronger than the rest of us and a determined guy," Norton said. "He was good at everything."

Glasson was particularly good at golf, which explains his induction into the Oklahoma Golf Hall of Fame as a Class of 2019 member.

While his future ORU teammates grew up as standout junior players, Glasson resided in Fresno, Calif., amid modest surroundings while living with his mother, who worked a few years with the state welfare department. Glasson couldn't afford to play in summer junior tournaments.

"Unlike most kids today, he had to pick up range balls to get privileges to hit practice balls while growing up," Carter said. "He came up the hard way."

Glasson excelled in sports, particularly football, basketball and track. When he blew out his left knee playing basketball in junior high and later suffered a track injury, Glasson rehabbed by playing golf more frequently. He started working at Fort Washington Golf & Country Club and began studying the swings of better players.

"My first impression of him is I thought he was a surfer from Long Beach or something," Kane said. "He wasn't that highly recruited, so I didn't really know who he was."

When Brogden was prospecting future talent at ORU, Glasson was suggested as a possible recruit and Brogden paid a visit to Fresno.

"Typical Bill, he played in a city tournament match one day barefooted and no shirt," Brogden said. "He's playing somebody who's 35 or 40 years old, and he beat him badly."

The Titans (now Golden Eagles) quickly became a national power and in 1981 had the best four-man rotation in the country with No. 1 Rassett, No. 2 Kane, No. 3 Norton (all seniors) and No. 4 Glasson (a junior). Trouble was, no other ORU player ever stepped up as the safety net at the No. 5 spot on the rare occasion one of the "Four Horsemen" scored poorly.

To this day, Brogden chastises himself for not offering a scholarship to a Minnesota high school recruit named Tom Lehman to fill that No. 5 spot. Had Lehman joined the mix, those Titans like-

ly would have been NCAA kings, perhaps multiple times. Lehman desperately wanted to play at ORU, but instead remained in his home state and played for the University of Minnesota. "Yup, that's how smart I am," Brogden said as he mumbled in disgust.

Despite playing 4-on-5 all season, the Titans occupied the No. 1 ranking before finishing runner-up to Brigham Young by two shots in the 1981 NCAA Championships at Stanford University Golf Course. (ORU placed third nationally in 1980 and sixth in 1979 and 1978.)

Glasson won seven times on the PGA Tour, where he pocketed more than $6.9 million in career prize money and led the PGA Tour in driving distance as a rookie in 1984. Glasson also has won more than $2.5 million on the PGA Champions Tour.

His first pro win came at the 1985 Kemper Open, where Glasson trailed leader Larry Mize by seven strokes with 14 holes to play. Glasson made a 45-foot birdie putt on the 72nd hole to win by one stroke.

At the 1995 U.S. Open at Shinnecock Hills, Glasson had his best career finish in a major at fourth place, trailing winner Corey Pavin, runner-up Greg Norman and some guy named Lehman, who has 35 career wins as a professional.

The Oral Roberts Titans, from left Bill Glasson, David Morris, Joey Rassett, Jim Kane, Bryan Norton, coach Bill Brogden.

Glasson's propensity for injuries that began in his childhood would plague him his entire career.

"Gol-ly, the guy was unbelievably talented," Jones said. "Outside of his injuries, who knows what he could have done? Seems like he was hurt more than he was playing. And every time he came back, he picked up right where he left off and would play well."

Rassett added on Glasson, "All those injuries didn't hamper what he wanted to accomplish."

Glasson captured the 1997 PGA Tour Comeback Player of the Year award with a victory at the Las Vegas Invitational, two second-place finishes, six top-10s and nearly $1 million in earnings, ranking him 22nd on that year's money list.

This came 17 months after Glasson had major surgery to his right forearm, yet somehow he still was able to lead the tour in the all-around statistical category, finish second in birdies, third in driving distance behind John Daly and Woods, and fourth in greens in regulation.

By this stage of his career, Glasson had endured four knee surgeries, four sinus operations, lip surgery, tendons reattached in both arms, plus severe back pain that cost

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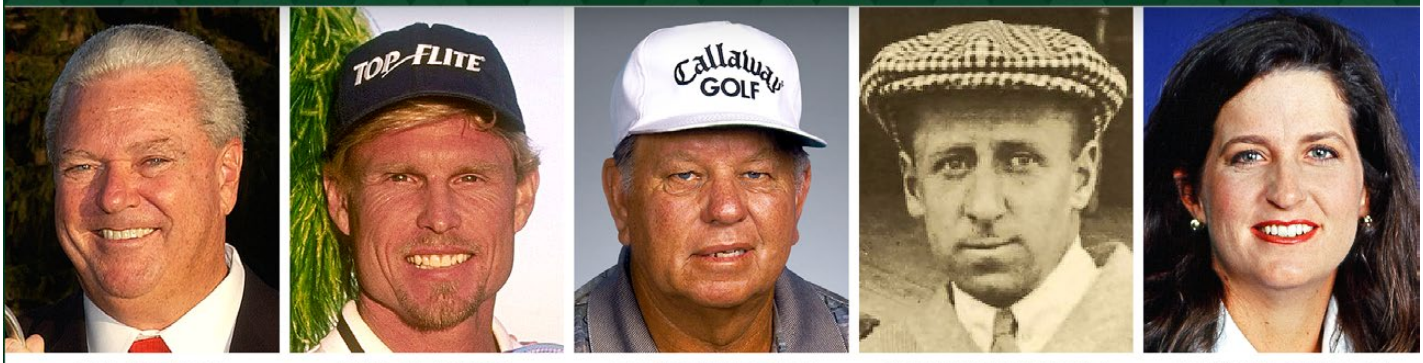

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him much of the 1991 season and nearly caused him to file for permanent disability. The exact number of Glasson surgeries is unknown, but it's in the 20-something range.

"I think he uses (all those injuries) as fuel," Brogden said. "It's as though he was saying, 'I've had all these surgeries and I'm tough enough that I'm gonna beat you anyway.' And I think he did that in a lot of cases."

Many touring pros tinker with their swings when they're completely healthy. Glasson tinkered his way through the pain while constantly re-creating his swing. "My movements may not be textbook," Glasson said to Sports Illustrated in 1998, "but they're dynamic."

"He's such an athlete," Brogden said. "You could tell him to do anything with his golf swing. Being as strong as he was, he could do anything because he went slow at it. He was not a fast golf swinger. He could make the club do what he wanted it to do."

Brogden said he warned Glasson against heavy weightlifting, fearing it would be too taxing on his body in the long run. Glasson has downplayed his workout regimen as a contributing factor, however.

Glasson continues to battle injuries on the Champions Tour, but he remains committed to fitness. He and wife, Shelley, who is a personal trainer, opened the Step4ward Fitness Training Center in Stillwater in 2016.

What set Glasson apart was his relentless, competitive drive, no matter the occasion.

"We played golf with him on Thursday and played basketball on Saturday and, whoa, that's where you saw the real competitive spirit of Bill Glasson," Carter said. "I think that's why he was successful on the professional tour, because he was just going to find a way to win."

Norton had the same experience.

"The only time I feared Bill was when we would play competitive pick-up basketball games," Norton said. "The more competitive it got, the more I didn't want to be guarding him. He was just a lot stronger than the rest of us and a determined guy. It's no shock he went on to be a successful tour player because once he could focus on just one sport and get world-class instruction, he was destined. He was so mentally tough. There's no disputing his determination."

Rassett was the Titans' top golfer and routinely beat Glasson in team qualifiers, but Glasson never backed down.

Receiving treatment for one of many ailments. *Photo by Kelly Kerr*

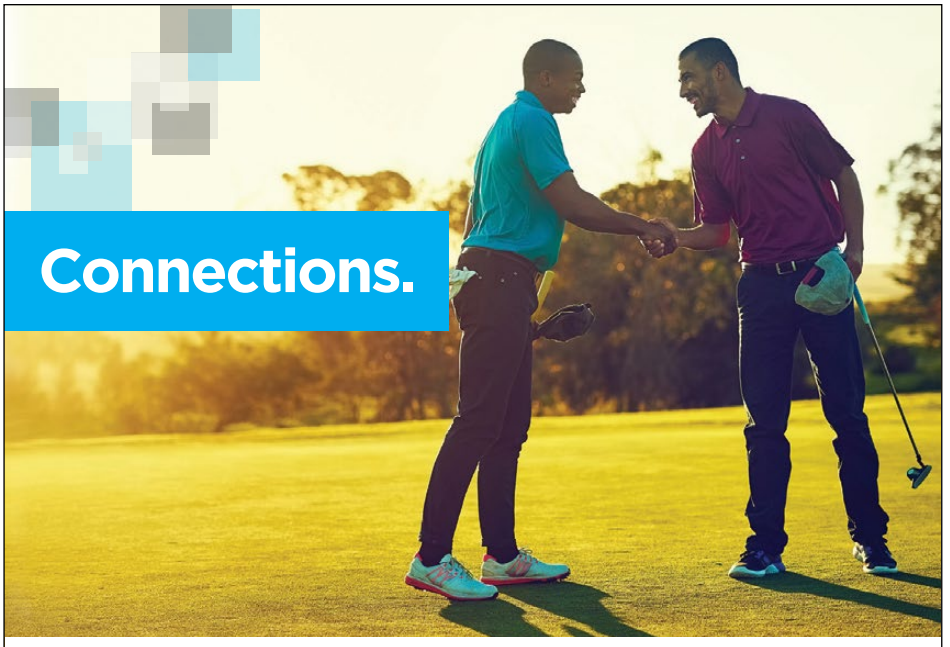
"He was a competitor to the bone," Rassett said. "The beating he sometimes took from his teammates only made him better and prepared him for what he would do, and I give him a lot of credit for that. He withstood it and he did it and my hat's off to him. He showed the tenacity, the desire and the drive to get better. It's what got him to where he was. That Oklahoma is honoring him for this, that's awesome."

Kane said of Glasson's pending induction: "I told Bill, 'You've done a lot more than you think you've done. The people who are inducting you are doing it for a reason.' I don't think he knows after all these years that we still appreciate him and care for him, admire what he did on tour. All that stuff."

Brogden spent 47 years as a collegiate coach and has proclaimed Glasson the most competitive player he's ever had.

"He wouldn't quit on you," Brogden said. "With Bill, you knew you were getting all you could get. For a coach, he was great to have because he would work as hard as he needed to work. That's why he was a success."

That's also why Glasson is a 2019 inductee into the Oklahoma Golf Hall of Fame.



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