

Ford SENIOR PLAYERS CHAMPIONSHIP

Snead seeks to avenge last-hole catastrophe

It all depends on how you look at it. You could argue that Dave Stockton played four rounds of excellent golf... HE WAS LEADING Stockton by two strokes as the duo approached the 18th tee and all he had to do was put the relatively harmless hole for the win.



Looking for redemption: J.C. Snead enters the Seniors Players Championship this year hoping to make up for a bad finish in 1992 when he lost a two-stroke lead on the final and tied for second place instead.

"Have you ever wrecked a car and then asked, 'Why did that have to happen to me?' That's the way I felt after last year's tournament, and I still feel that way. It was not a good experience. I don't feel like I choked. I think I relaxed too much on the final hole. I was real nervous at the 17th hole and did okay there. I headed to the 18th tee relaxed, but I screwed up. I hit a bad shot. Basically, I pulled the iron and hit the ball with the bottom of the club. If I had hit it solid it would have been a perfect tee shot. You know what they say about 'if?' Hey, that's life. I do know this. I would like to come to the last hole at the TPC of Michigan with a two-stroke lead again."

- J.C. Snead

"I really wasn't nervous. I wasn't even thinking about it," Snead claimed at the time. "I just pulled it to the left. I didn't get it up in the air and I didn't hit it straight. If it had been anywhere to the right, I'd have been OK." "IT WASN'T. And while the word 'choke' never left his lips, Snead admitted feeling a bit crunched in crunch time. "That was the biggest disappointment I ever had," he said. "I rolled over and died (of asphyxiation?) when I had a chance to win. It's like having two shots on the foul line at the end of a game and shooting two balls."

As time has passed, Snead has thought a lot about what happened and, with his big chance to make amends rapidly approaching, he is asked about it all the time. "Have you ever wrecked a car and then asked, 'Why did that happen to me?' That's the way I felt after last year's tournament and I still feel that way," he said. "It was not a good experience."

"I DON'T FEEL like I choked. I think I relaxed too much on the final hole. I was real nervous at the 17th hole and I did OK there and I headed to the 18th tee relaxed, but I screwed up. I hit a bad shot. "If I had hit it solid, it would have been a perfect tee shot. You know what they say about 'if?' Hey, that's life." While C'est La Vie Snead waxed philosophical about the loss, Stockton dipped into a little psychology

to explain what happened. It was sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy thing, according to Stockton. "I spent a day and a half pumping him up," Stockton said. "He kept talking about something going wrong. Even though he was in the lead, he wasn't happy."

"WE WERE both under pressure. We hadn't won yet and here everybody tells you how easy it is to win on the Senior Tour. He knows now that he screwed up." And so does everyone else, which means the choke label will still be in the back of everyone's mind when Snead returns to Dearborn.

The best way to erase it will be with a victory when he hops back on the horse that threw him and that fact has not eluded Snead.

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His win in '91 made Albus a regular on Senior Tour

For two of its three champions, winning Dearborn's Senior Tour event was like a blast from the past. Nicklaus won it the first time around in 1950 in record-setting fashion. He shot a PGA record-tying 27-under par at the Mazda Senior TPC at the Dearborn Country Club and earned the biggest single-tournament paycheck of his career. But let's be realistic, when you've won as many tournaments as the Bear, one more is just another day at the bank. Dave Stockton won it last year. His resume doesn't look like Nicklaus', but then whose does? STOCKTON STILL HAD won two PGA Championships (1970 and 76), captained the 1991 Ryder Cup team to victory and won nearly \$2 million in his career when he captured last year's crown. "But that guy in the middle, Man, winning was special for him. Jim Albus, at the time the club pro at the Piping Rock Country Club in East Valley, NY, shocked everyone by winning the championship in 1991, and all it did was alter his lifestyle in "Hey, I just won the lottery" fashion. "You might say it changed my life," said Albus, who has since bade farewell to his days of changing the grips of the hackers at Piping Rock and become a fixture on the Senior Tour. "It really pushed me to leave the job and do this full-time." The "it" Albus spoke of can be translated as the \$150,000 check he cashed after winning his first championship. "I HAD a decent job," he said. "The money was nice, but not great. To make the kind of money I made in one shot took away the only reservation I had about playing full-time. "I didn't have to worry about getting my kids through school anymore." Albus, who had made a whopping \$3,750 in his limited forays onto the PGA Tour, didn't come to Dearborn with any dreams of triumph. He was just giving it a shot. "When you're playing, you don't

"I feel very comfortable on the TPC of Michigan course. It really helps me mentally to go back there since I've won there before. It's a good golf course. You've got to hit the ball and can't fake it. Several of the holes are pretty demanding. In fact, the course might be the most demanding we have all year, which is what you need for a major championship."

- Jim Albus

think about that sort of thing," he said. "I didn't know if I was going to stay at the club or not. It just sort of happened. Albus played 37 senior tournaments last year, placing in the top 10 seven times. His best finish was a second at the Northville Long Island Classic and he wound up winning \$401,693. THIS YEAR, HE picked up his second career victory with a win at the GTE Seacoast Classic in February and he's hanging around the top 10 money winners so far. But that's not to say he's been converted from a lifelong duffer to a star just by virtue of one championship. "I wouldn't say I'm playing a lot better now than before I started playing full-time," he said. "I expected to do better playing every week and working on my own golf instead of worrying about anyone else's." Albus also claims his game today isn't markedly different from what it was, say, 20 years ago. "There's not that much difference between 50 and 30 in golf," said Albus, who is 53. "What you lose in power, you pick up in smarts and you don't lose too much in terms of ability."

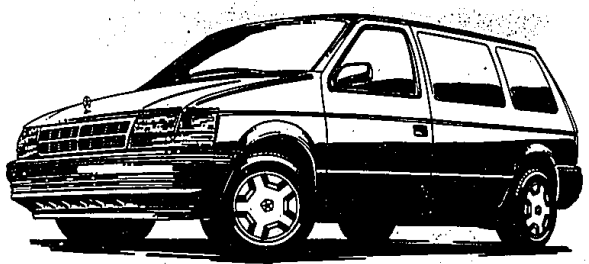
"THESE GUYS STILL do well and they're still fun to watch." Which explains the success of the Senior Tour and its attractiveness to a guy like Albus, who finds more time on his hands as his children grow and leave home. "When you look at it, it's a natural thing for success," he said. "I thought all along it would do well, but nothing like what it's been. "The guys are taking better care of themselves and taking it more seriously because they're playing for a lot of money. "If some of these guys were playing all the time on the regular tour, they would still be doing well because the difference is not that great. "That's not the case when comparing most courses the Senior Tour visits and the TPC of Michigan. Dearborn is different. "I LIKED THE course from the beginning," Albus said. "You can't get by with just good putting, you've got to do everything else. "Some courses, if you putt real well, you're going to win. That's not true up there." Which means big hitters like the muscular 0-2 Albus can shine. "The strength of my game is driving the ball," he said. "On some courses, that's not a big deal, but Dearborn is a good, honest driving course." And, like course designer Nicklaus intended, it forces players to play well - as Albus did in 1991 - to win. "Good players do well there," Albus said. "It's the most demanding course we play, so the good players do better. "You may think that makes me a fluke but, if you look, the next 10 behind me were all top players. On a tough course, the cream rises to the top." ALBUS FINISHED tied for 18th last year and part of that may have been due to the pressure of being the defending champ. "I was nervous both years," he said, "but I was more nervous as the defending champion than I was the year before."

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