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# College Sports Deluxe: The Golf Team

*Forget Football: At Schools Like Oklahoma State, It's the Sweetest Gig on Campus*



By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT



Tulsa World

Teeing Up Their Future: Talor Gooch of Oklahoma State is the seventh-ranked college player.

## *Stillwater, Okla.*

As late as the 1960s and 1970s, college golf usually meant lugging a bag of mix-and-match clubs out to a modestly maintained public course, under the tutelage of a part-time coach, and shooting rounds in the mid-70s if you were the best on the team. These days, most elite college golf programs have their own courses or state-of-the-art practice facilities, full-time coaches plus strength coaches and psychologists, and alumni support that even the football teams might envy. If they play their cards right, golfers on the top college teams can leave school set for life.

College sports doesn't get much plusher than playing golf for Oklahoma State. The Karsten Creek

golf facility, a few miles off campus, features a rolling, wooded, difficult, 7,407-yard Tom Fazio course, expansive practice grounds, both indoors and out, with all the latest technology, a \$4.5 million clubhouse and luxurious, six-bedroom lodges where visiting alumni can stay. Most remarkable of all, the entire 650-acre complex is owned not by the university but in effect by the golf team. Karsten Creek, which opened in 1994, was built and is still owned by a charity whose sole purpose is to benefit the men's and women's golf teams.

Faculty, staff, other students? They can't play unless they pay a deliberately outrageous \$300 green fee or are the guests of the limited number of local and national members. "We like having a few successful grown-ups around as members so the team will have role models," said Mike McGraw, the men's golf coach.

"This golf course exists for one reason and one reason only, and that's to help Oklahoma State win national championships," said former golf coach Mike Holder. He conceived Karsten Creek chiefly as a recruiting tool, and raised enough funds to fully pay for it before construction began. Among the prime donors: avid alumnus [T. Boone Pickens](#) and Ping Golf founder Karsten Solheim.

Holder is now athletic director at Oklahoma State, but remains proud of the golf program. The school has won nine national golf championships since 1976, five more than any other school in that period (it also won in 1963), and 54 conference titles since 1947. Recent Oklahoma State stars include Rickie Fowler and Hunter Mahan. By comparison, the Cowboys' football team, although on the upswing, has won just one outright conference title since 1953—last year.

At Oklahoma State as at most big American universities, football is the glamour sport, followed by basketball. They bring in the most money. For the players themselves, however, golf is a much sweeter deal, especially in the long run.

They don't get maimed, for one thing. No concussions. Golf teams are small, usually only eight to 10 members, a dozen at most, with only five or six traveling to most tournaments. It's an intimate group, under the close, four-year supervision of a coach dedicated to each team member's success, both on the course and off. A few players will go on to make millions on the PGA Tour, but statistically most will make their careers in business, where, let's face it, possessing a scratch handicap and the cachet of having been Bubba Watson's teammate at Georgia or Phil Mickelson's at Arizona State confers enormous advantage. For football players, the ability to take down a 220-pound running back is of limited use after graduation. In fact, as is well known, many wind up on the scrap heap.

Pat Goss, now in his 17th year as golf coach at Northwestern, calculates that of the 32 players he has coached for all four years, 21 turned pro after graduation, and four of them made it to the PGA Tour by age 25—most notably Luke Donald. But only Donald has made a career on the big stage. Overall just five or six of Goss's former charges, most of them recent graduates, are still actively giving the pro game a shot.

"All the kids I recruit aspire to play on the PGA Tour, and most of them absolutely have the talent to make it," Goss said. "At the same time, my office is lined with trophies of first-team All-Americans who played here and didn't make it as professionals. The chances are pretty good that they're going to need life after golf."

Like most major colleges, Northwestern has a career services office for student-athletes: etiquette classes, résumé building, alumni contacts. But golfers, Goss said, need that help the least. Lacking a home course, Northwestern players spend four years playing and practicing at a half-dozen or so

private clubs in the Chicago area. There they are treated like royalty, play frequently with members and acquire polish. Goss ticked off for me the names of several former players who, after chasing their golf dreams for a while, quickly found jobs through the golf team's alumni network. Several got their start, for example, at the New York investment banking firm owned by Eric Gleacher, a Northwestern alum who donated the team's indoor practice facility.

Similar old-boy networks surround most of the top-tier golf programs. Last summer I visited the new 60-acre practice facility at Stanford, a gift from alumni for the exclusive use of golf-team members, donors and select (read: high-profile) alumni like Jim Plunkett. Designed by Robert Trent Jones II and associates, it features five green complexes, each designed in the architectural style of the courses of its main rivals: Pete Dye for Arizona State, Alister MacKenzie for Ohio State, etc.

Even so, Karsten Creek stands out for being the first and still most elaborate college golf complex. Tucked away behind trees, which act as a windbreak in the cold Oklahoma winters, is a Shangri-La-like short-game area. At another vast practice ground, with multiple greens and a plethora of targets, the players are required to shag their own balls. "We think it teaches discipline. They can learn a lot from examining their shot patterns," McGraw said when he gave me a tour.

In the heated practice shed at the main driving range, two current players, Kevin Dougherty and Talor Gooch, were being fitted for new clubs by Titleist using the school's high-tech motion-analysis system.

"Why wouldn't I come here?" Dougherty told me. "The facilities are part of it, but the tradition of winning counts for more. Not coming here would be like not going to Kentucky if you're recruited for basketball."

Later, back at the clubhouse, I saw Dougherty and Gooch chowing down with their mates at the training table—country-club-quality food served in, essentially, a country-club grill room. The current crop of golfers were getting ready for the afterlife, one way or the other.

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