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Why America's Best Golf Prospect May Never Turn Pro

Maverick McNealy—Stanford star and son of Sun Microsystems' co-founder—is not certain that pro golf is what he wants to do with his life



Maverick McNealy plays a tee shot during the Walker Cup at Royal Lytham & St. Annes Golf Club in England on Sept. 12, 2015. PHOTO: CLINT HUGHES/GETTY IMAGES

By **BRIAN COSTA**

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The question follows Maverick McNealy just about everywhere, from the Stanford University campus to golf tournaments around the country. He hears it from classmates, competitors, prospective agents and most anyone else who has seen him play.

“When are you going to turn pro?”

It is a reasonable question. After three years at Stanford, McNealy is America's most highly rated professional golf prospect, one more star from a school whose alumni in the sport include Tiger Woods and Tom Watson. But when McNealy hears the question, he offers a polite correction: It is a matter of if, not when.

Less than a year from his expected graduation, McNealy said he is seriously considering passing on pro golf for a career in business, a decision that would be virtually unparalleled in the modern world of big-money sports.

“I still don’t really know what I’m going to do with my life,” he said.

To understand the rarity of what the 20-year-old McNealy is contemplating, consider this: Among his highest accolades is the Haskins Award, which has been presented annually to the nation’s best collegiate male golfer since 1971. Every other player to win it turned pro. Since 1990, the recipients have gone on to earn more than \$600 million in prize money and untold millions in endorsements.



Sun Microsystems co-founder Scott McNealy caddies for his son amateur Maverick McNealy during a practice round prior to the start of the 2014 U.S. Open. *PHOTO: STREETER LECKA/GETTY IMAGES*

But McNealy, the second-ranked amateur in the world, is not the typical golf prodigy. The sport has not consumed his entire life. He also played hockey and soccer before college. And the potential riches offered by pro golf aren’t as much of a draw for him.

His father, Scott, co-founded Sun Microsystems, the Silicon Valley giant acquired by Oracle Corp. for \$7.4 billion in 2010. And while Maverick said he intends to become financially independent, both he and his father view pro golf as something less than a higher calling.

“Part of the challenge for Mav and the thing I worry about most,” Scott McNealy said, “is will he get intellectually bored after three years, trying to spend eight hours a day on the range, playing six-hour rounds and traveling around like a gypsy?”

The elder McNealy recalled a conversation they had late last year. Maverick said if he were to turn pro, merely winning a few tournaments wouldn’t be worth it. His father

named a golfer who had won two major titles but wasn't a top-10 player and asked if that kind of career would satisfy him. The answer was no. What if he could become the next Jordan Spieth? "He said, 'Well dad, I'm not even sure that does it for me,'" Scott McNealy said, "so he's wrestling with it."

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—Scott McNealy

Maverick McNealy said he isn't sure what kind of business he would go into. His major is management science and engineering. For all he knows, he said, one of his classmates will approach him with a promising idea for a startup and ask him to join. He is also interested in helping young people learn from their amateur athletic experiences in ways that will benefit them in their adult lives.

"My dad always tells me, 'To whom much is given, much is expected,'" he said. "I'm given a huge amount of opportunities, and I feel like it's my duty to do the most that I can with them. I'm still trying to figure out how."

His father, who played golf at Harvard, shares his love of the game. But his view of it as a professional endeavor is less than flattering.

"If you are an entertainer, it's counterproductive from the standpoint that people stop doing anything and just sit and watch entertainers," Scott said. "The guy serving you food at a golf tournament is in so many ways doing more good and moving the capitalist ball forward than Tiger Woods."

In some respects, Maverick is a throwback to the early days of American golf, when amateurism was an aristocratic virtue and playing the game for a living was frowned on. Bobby Jones, the most famous amateur golfer ever, was a lawyer by profession. He won all four of what were considered the major golf tournaments in 1930 and became one of the co-founders of Augusta National Golf Club.

Given how competitive pro golf is at the highest level, McNealy conceded it is unlikely for anyone to become a modern-day Jones. But if he decides not to turn pro, he envisions himself competing in elite amateur events and attempting to enter the U.S. Open through qualifying tournaments.



Maverick McNealy lines up a putt on the 12th hole during the first round of the Greenbrier Classic on July 2, 2015. PHOTO: DARREN CARROLL/GETTY IMAGES

The best amateurs tend to be young players who simply haven't turn pro yet, but there are exceptions. Mike McCoy, a 53-year-old insurance executive from Iowa, and Scott Harvey, a 38-year-old North Carolina property manager, were among McNealy's teammates at last year's Walker Cup, a prestigious amateur event. He spoke at length with both of them about what it was like to juggle day jobs and families with competitive golf.

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"I do see golf being a huge part of my life going

forward regardless," Maverick said.

To be sure, that may yet mean joining the PGA Tour. McNealy's early experience at professional tournaments has been encouraging. Since missing the cut at the 2014 U.S. Open, he has made the cut at three PGA Tour events in which he competed without pay. He finished tied for 46th place at the Arnold Palmer Invitational in March.

It would be far easier for him to try pro golf and then move into business full-time than it would be for him to attempt to turn pro later in life. And it's conceivable that he could

do enough nonprofit work on the side to satisfy the obligation he feels to impact more than his own wallet.

But it remains a question of if, not when. And to those who have seen him play, that remains puzzling.

“Most people look at me like I’m crazy,” he said.

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