



Charles Schwab Cup entices Lehman

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There still is about six months to go before the Scottsdale debut of the Charles Schwab Cup, the season-ending Champions Tour event that delivers a \$2.5 million purse to the top-30 money winners from 2012 as well as \$1 million annuity to the overall winner.

Even so, organizers are working nonstop to get the word out while searching for sponsors and volunteers. Apparently that's why Ian Knight, the tournament's executive director, and Bob Jones, the chief operating officer at the host club, Desert Mountain, met with the media on Wednesday (May 16).

Oh, yes, and reigning Charles Schwab Cup champion Tom Lehman also made the drive up Pima Road from his home at DC Ranch just to liven up the occasion.

Or as Jones said of the tournament and how it relates to the long-time Scottsdale resident: "Just a little event that Tom's going to win. Right, Tom?"

Don't be surprised if it happens, as Lehman and Desert Mountain go way back.

"It's where it all got started for me," Lehman told me before he took the microphone to talk about the CSC, which takes place Oct. 28-Nov. 4 on the Cochise Course – the same Jack Nicklaus-designed layout that once hosted The Tradition (1989-2002).

"The Tradition was always a great event and a great time, and I'd spend a couple of hours working with (instructor) Jim (Flick) up there, and then stick

around and watch Jack play in the tournament. Funny thing about The Tradition: When it moved to Portland (Oregon, 2003-2006) and then on to Sunriver (Oregon, 2007-2010), it lost some of that major championship feel. But then it got a little bit of that major feel back when it moved to Shoal Creek (in Alabama, 2011).”

Lehman would know. Hey, he is the defending Tradition champ, an honor he’ll defend in a couple of weeks. It was his big win among three W’s last year as he blazed his way to his first Charles Schwab Cup title and that \$1 million jackpot.

It didn’t come easy, however, as the 53-year-old Lehman finished tied for 18th at Harding Park in San Francisco to hold off Ahwatukee’s Mark Calcavecchia by a mere 74 points. Had Calcavecchia finished solo second instead of a tied for second with Loren Roberts, Jay Haas and Scottsdale’s Michael Allen, he would have won the coveted Cup and the behemoth bonus.

We can only hope for such a climatic finish here in Scottsdale, where Desert Mountain will serve as the host course on an every-other-year basis with San Francisco’s Harding Park. That’s right, come 2013, the CSC will return to Harding Park before coming back to the desert in 2014.

A lot has changed at Desert Mountain since the good old days of The Tradition. For one thing, the members now own the six-course complex designed solely by Nicklaus, and they are putting their money -- \$3 billion in real estate -- where their mouths are by bringing in the CSC, which is one of the top six tournaments on the Champions schedule, which includes five majors. Hey, it’s a most memorable way to celebrate the 25th anniversary at Desert Mountain, which opened in 1987. And just to complete the party, Jack, the guy who won a record four Traditions, will be back for the CSC, too.

Lehman said he remembers those early days quite well, and he told a story about his first encounter with Flick, which came in 1990 as he was just returning to professional golf on the Nationwide Tour after turning down a gig to be the golf coach at his alma mater, the University of Minnesota. As he pointed out, he could pretty much do everything well when it came to golf back in those days except, “I couldn’t hit an 80-yard wedge shot inside 30 feet.”

“I called up Flick, and I said, ‘I’m not going to beg, but please give me some time with my wedges,’ “ Lehman said, laughing at the recollection.

As Lehman pointed out, Flick had never heard of him, but after Flick called

Andrew Magee and a few other local touring pros, he cleared Lehman with a quick and informal background check. Lehman and Flick – and Nicklaus – have been together as pupils and teacher ever since.

“That began a 22-year relationship with Jim, who still is my instructor and good friend,” said Lehman, who went on to win five times on both the PGA and Champions, the biggest of all being the 1996 British Open.

“Through Jim I met Jack, and that also brought a relationship with this club,” he added. “So here we are. I guess it’s kind of come full circle.”

Well, not quite. Lehman, the only player to ever win POY honors on the Nationwide, PGA and Champions tours, would like to win the CSC, and what better place than here in his hometown, the same place where he captured his last win on the PGA Tour – the 2000 Phoenix Open?

“I’ve got to qualify for it first,” said Lehman, who played most of his golf on “the Mountain” at the Renegade and Geronimo courses and not Cochise. “But, hopefully, I’ll be here in November.”

Chances are good that's a "gimme." Even though Lehman currently sits 15th on the CSC points list, the 50-and-over circuit is just now getting into the “meat of the season,” as he called it. And he’s right, the Senior PGA Championship, which he won in 2010, gets things rolling next week followed by The Tradition in two weeks. It’s pretty much nonstop the rest of the way.

Lehman, who has not won this year after visiting the victory circle three times last year, said he’s gotten off to a slow start because he was “worn out” from 2011. He blamed some “ache-y knees” and a slight weight gain, as well as playing 29 times – a heavy schedule by his standards.

“I had a great chance (to win) at Houston the last time out, and Fred Funk just played better,” he said of his runner-up finish by a single shot at the Insuperity Championship. “As for my game, it’s in high gear.”

Which, of course, is the kind of thing what will bring the fans out to Desert Mountain come this fall. In fact, the Valley should have a relatively strong presence in the CSC, as Allen leads the standings, with Calcavecchia, Phoenix’s Tom Purtzer and Hale Irwin of Paradise Valley currently among the top 30. Heck, you’ll even see part-time resident Fred Couples in the mix and maybe rookie Kirk Triplett of Scottsdale.

Of course, nobody packs them in like Lehman even if Allen is having a career year. Asked if he thought Allen could hold up, Lehman quipped, “I hope

not!”

“He’s a very good player, and he’s just coming into his own,” Lehman said of Allen. “He’s doing everything right, and he’s in great shape, which is what you have to be (on the Champions Tour).

“He’s also very motivated, and motivation is everything.”

Lehman said Allen is a character that likes to have fun – “maybe too much fun.” That observation came about from an incident earlier this season, when Allen went to get Lehman a glass of wine at the Hualalai Four Seasons during the Mitsubishi Electric Championship and never came back.

“(Allen) just kept working the room, shaking hands, laughing with everybody . . . like a president,” Lehman said, chuckling at the thought. “So I call him ‘Mr. President.’ ”

Say this about Lehman: He too enjoys the good life with his wife Melissa and their four kids. And being a Renaissance man, he appreciates the fact that the Champions Tour is returning to Desert Mountain where it all got started for him in a roundabout way.

Asked how he thought the Charles Schwab Cup at Desert Mountain would stack up against the rest of the Champions' tournaments, he gave this assessment, which is pretty much in line with what the ol' Over the Hill Gang thought when they played in The Tradition.

“I’m not sure you can do much better than Desert Mountain,” he said of all the amenities that go with Arizona’s most elite private golf club. “They had the will to try and attempt to do everything right, and they did it.

“I mean, we have some other venues, like Shoal Creek, which is a lot like Augusta (National) in terms of the high-end quality of course and the club. But it’s a way different ambiance from this. This is spectacular, awesome with so much flair. So Desert Mountain . . . it’s just one of a kind.”

Words that would seem to also describe Tom Lehman to a “T.”