

Zach Johnson raises \$700,000 for Foundation

Written by Jim Ecker
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Zach Johnson and 5,000 of his closest friends had a grand time at Elmcrest Country Club on Monday.

They raised approximately \$700,000 for the Zach Johnson Foundation to help kids and treated fans to an enjoyable day of golf, jokes, autographs, pictures and old-fashioned goodwill.

The second annual Zach Johnson Foundation Classic was bigger and better than last year's smash hit, according to Johnson.

"Does it surprise me? No, not really," he said before teeing off. "My board has worked really, really hard to build off last year. Last year was an amazing event, and they wanted to make it even better this year."

Pat Cobb, chairman of the Johnson Foundation, pegged this year's proceeds at \$700,000, not counting possible contributions by Johnson himself. Last year, Zach and Kim Johnson donated \$500,000 to help get the event started, matching the amount raised for the 2011 event and putting last year's proceeds over \$1 million.

Cobb said he wasn't sure if the Johnsons would make a donation this year now that the event is established, and Johnson did not make any announcements during the awards ceremony late Monday afternoon before heading to the airport.

Johnson said he was delighted with the turnout Monday. Larry Gladson, the pro at Elmcrest, estimated the crowd at 5,000 on a hot day with the temperature in the high 90's, compared to approximately 4,500 fans last year.

"The support doesn't surprise me, because that's what this community is about," Johnson said. "They probably heard a little bit about last year's event and how much fun it was and what it was all about, and more than that they just wanted to come out and support."

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"That's what Iowans are about and it's what Cedar Rapidsians are about," said Johnson, a Cedar Rapids native, "and I don't see that changing in the future."

Johnson would hit a shot, sign autographs, hit another shot, pose for pictures, hit a shot, sign more caps and golf gloves and memorabilia, joking with fans and always looking for an opportunity to interact with kids.

He summoned a young boy from the crowd that circled the 18th green to get his advice on reading the final putt of the day. Johnson missed the putt and quickly looked at the boy in mock dismay, as if blaming the youngster for the errant shot, before breaking into a big smile and laughing.

Johnson himself was an easy target for a pair of his PGA Tour buddies during a clinic prior to the round of golf. Ben Crane took the hand-held microphone to introduce a segment he called the "Rules of the Game," ostensibly to give fans a few pointers, but it was the prelude to a comedy routine that was aimed at Johnson.

The first rule of the game, Crane and fellow Tour member Stewart Cink agreed, is to play the ball where it lies. Johnson was paying attention, not realizing the "reminder" was being directed at him for his failure to properly mark his ball on the 18th green at the Crowne Plaza Invitational earlier this season.

Johnson used the head of his putter to move his ball out of the way of another golfer at the Crown Plaza Invy, then forgot to place the ball back where it belonged before putting himself. That cost him a two-stroke penalty, although he still won the tournament by one shot.

Crane and Cink presented Johnson with an oversized ball marker, about the size of a coaster you might use for drinks, that said "Z" on one side and "Remember the Colonial" on the other. They encouraged Johnson to use the special marker in future events so he wouldn't forget to put the ball where it belongs.

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The next piece of advice they gave Johnson concerned his misadventure at the John Deere Classic this summer. Johnson was locked in a playoff with Troy Matteson when Matteson hit his shot into the water, practically handing Johnson the John Deere title, but Johnson promptly put his next shot into the water as well.

That prompted this piece of advice from Crane: "If your opponent goes into the water, your next shot should not go into the water as well. You should not follow your opponent."

Nobody laughed harder than Johnson, although he did joke at the awards ceremony that next year he'll try to invite friends from the PGA Tour who won't pick on him.

Johnson invited questions from fans during the clinic and one youngster inquired, "Are you signing autographs?"

Johnson laughed and replied, "There's a magic word."

"Please?" the boy responded.

Johnson's group ended up tying for top honors in the event at 38-under par with a group headed by pro golfer Sara Brown. Mark Jennings, Steve Gray, Drew Skogman and Erick Skogman were in Johnson's group, while Jon Sefton, Brad Canfield, Ron Hammerberg and Thomas Hoyt played in the same group with Brown.

Jennings, an associate athletic director at the University of Iowa, got to know Johnson in 2009 when Johnson played nine holes at Finkbine to help raise money for flood relief in Iowa City, but this was the first time they had played golf together.

"For me, it was like Bucket List day," Jennings said. "For me it was absolutely a dream come true to play 18 holes with Zach. This was awesome."

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Johnson has won twice on the PGA Tour this year, including the John Deere Classic after he followed Matteson into the water. He has an excellent shot at making the Ryder Cup team, one of the most prestigious accomplishments in golf.

"I don't want to jinx myself yet. There's still a lot of work to be done," he said. "I've got some momentum and I think I'm on the right track.

"It's certainly a goal of mine every year. To represent your country in anything is an honor, so hopefully I have that opportunity."

Johnson, 36, has established himself as one of the top golfers in the world with more than \$4 million in earnings this year alone.

"I don't pinch myself. My kids do. Literally," he said. "They scrape my arm up and left a bruise.

"I try not to take it for granted," he said of his success. "Being a golfer has meant so much to me and my family.

"I've got a God-given ability that I don't take lightly. I try to remind myself of that every day."