

Celeb golf regular Rypien wants to join Champions Tour

By Scott Hanson, Seattle Times

You're one of the greatest athletes in Washington state history, you've quarterbacked a Super Bowl winner and your foundation just donated \$3 million to a Children's Emergency Center at Spokane's Sacred Heart Hospital.

Having just turned 50, what do you do for an encore?

Try to make it on golf's Champions Tour, of course.



Mark Rypien wants to do more than play at the ACC each year at Edgewood Tahoe. Photo/LTN file

That was the goal for Mark Rypien, who spent a week this month at the first stage of the 50-and-over Champions Tour qualifying school in Murrieta.

“I love challenges, and this Q school is a challenge,” said Rypien, a star at Shadle Park High in Spokane before going to Washington State and the Washington Redskins.

It was more of a challenge than he might have thought. Rypien opened with an 81 after a double-bogey on his first hole, but he got progressively better, shooting 77, 75 and 71 on the final three days.

Although Rypien wasn't one of 14 players who advanced to the final qualifying (he tied for 25th in a field of 47), he was pleased with the improvement.

“The first day I was over my head, and then I started playing golf,” he said. “These guys are just amazing. I didn't make my first birdie until the 12th hole of the second round, and I started to wonder if there were any birdies out there. And the leaders are shooting 67 – now that's golfing your ball.”

Rypien, who also starred in baseball and basketball at Shadle Park (he led the basketball team that beat Mercer Island in the controversial 1981 state championship), discovered when he was young he had a natural golf swing.

After getting drafted by the Washington Redskins in 1986, he lived a couple of blocks from Reston National Golf Course in Virginia. After finishing his morning work, he would walk to the course, carrying his clubs.

“It was a great chance to meet people, and I went from a 15 handicap to a 7 in one summer,” he said.

His pro football career took a little longer to take off. He didn't play in a game in his first two seasons, but after starting six games in 1988, he became the team's full-time starter the next five seasons.

Rypien led the Redskins to the 1992 Super Bowl title and was named the game's MVP. He also played in two Pro Bowls before

finishing his career in 2001.

Meanwhile, his golf game continued to improve. He won the inaugural Celebrity Golf Championship at Lake Tahoe in 1990, and finished second at the tournament this past summer.

That was just the continuation of good play this year, according to Rypien, who has all the competition he wants from his brother Tim, whose handicap is two shots better than scratch.

"I was playing well, creeping to 50, and it's the youngest I could ever be at Q school, so I decided to see what it looks like," he said.

Before Q school, Rypien talked with Rick Rhoden, the former major-league pitcher who spent time on the Champions Tour. He also found inspiration from John Brodie, the former 49ers quarterback who played on the Champions Tour for 14 years.

Rypien did well enough last week to try qualifying again next year, but he vows to be more prepared. When winter hits in Spokane, he quits playing, and he even takes time off in the summer.

"I will need to play and practice more," he said.

It's not like he has trouble finding things to do, between tutoring his nephew, Brett Rypien, Shadle Park High's star quarterback, and working with the Rypien Foundation, which provides assistance for families battling childhood cancer.

Rypien began the foundation six years after losing his 3-year-old son, Andrew, to cancer in 1998.

"It's the most rewarding thing that I do," Rypien said.

But he knows his game has to get better to make the Champions Tour.

“These guys out here are really, really good,” he said.