

Phelps signs on to stroke golf ball at ACC

By Peter Schmuck, Baltimore Sun

Baltimore's homegrown all-time Olympic hero was willing to serve his golf apprenticeship in front of a cable television audience as part of the Golf Channel series "The Haney Project." Now, Michael Phelps is ready to take his new avocation to another level.

Phelps has signed on to play in front of a national broadcast television audience in the American Century Celebrity Golf Championship July 21-26 at the Edgewood Tahoe in Stateline. His commitment to play in the event was confirmed Tuesday morning by a tournament official and acknowledged on a conference call involving swing coach Hank Haney later in the day, but the official announcement will not be made until next week.

It's not the U.S. Open, but it's a real tournament featuring a number of terrific celebrity golfers, some good enough to play on the PGA Senior Tour. It's also the event that made the horrible swing of basketball great Charles Barkley so infamous that Haney tried to fix it on the same show that recently showcased Phelps and his budding interest in golf.



Michael Phelps will make his

debut at the ACC in Lake Tahoe in July. Photo/Channel Guide

Obviously, Phelps isn't afraid to face his new sports challenges in front of the world. He showed up at Orioles spring training in February with Haney in tow to take batting practice with his hometown baseball team. He got off to a rocky start in his first few rounds, but eventually made some good contact and got some praise from manager Buck Showalter and Adam Jones.

Haney isn't making any bold predictions about how Phelps might do on such a big stage less than a year after turning his attention from swimming to golf, but he said that Phelps has been a joy to coach.

"It's obviously an advantage to coach anybody that's used to having coaching," Haney said on a conference call. "This year on my show with Michael Phelps, it was great because he's been coached his whole career by Bob Bowman, who is obviously one of the greatest swimming coaches ever. Michael is so used to taking instruction and being coached that it's a big advantage. And great athletes are easier to coach, there's no doubt about that. Charles [Barkley] might be the exception. He's a little tough, but when it's all said and done he's one of my favorite people in the world, so I love him and I love helping him."

It'll be interesting to see just how far he has come with his golf swing. He certainly didn't win more Olympic gold medals than anyone in history by not preparing well, so it's probably fair to assume that he'll hunker down over the next few weeks getting ready to take on the likes of Michael Jordan, comedian Larry the Cable Guy and former Ravens quarterback Trent Dilfer in an event that is at times a serious competition and at other times – usually involving Barkley – a theater of the absurd.

“Michael is obviously incredibly competitive,” Haney said. “I mean, he’s the greatest Olympian ever. I’ve seen him when he’s in competition, even when it’s just having a friendly bet with some friends. He can really turn it up, so I expect that he will give his best, but having said that, a year ago he was pretty much a beginning golfer.

“He played six times after the Olympics and shot between 98 and 117. Now, the last time we played he shot 85, but that wasn’t at the American Century Championship. ... It wasn’t in front of all the people and with the television cameras on, so I don’t expect that he’s going to win the tournament, but I think he’s going to hit a lot of good shots and he’s going to show some improvement and I think everybody’s going to enjoy having him play in the tournament.”

Phelps was not available for comment, but will likely take part in next week’s official media announcement.