

Tahoe celebrity tourney challenges pro athletes



Ex-49ers and hall of famers Steve Young and Jerry Rice are regulars at the ACC golf tournament. Photo/LTN file

Hall of famers driven to excel at secondary sport

By Susan Wood

If you think it's humbling to try to break into professional sports and then enter the Hall of Fame, then try golf once you've reached the top of your game. Golf can be the most humbling sport of all.

But that's all in the sport of life for 15 hall of famers who will be joining 78 other participants in the American Century Championship starting next week at Edgewood Tahoe Golf Course. Four of those hall of famers will be inducted this summer.

So what draws and drives these athletes who were once at the

top of their game in professional football, baseball, basketball and hockey to compete in such a different type of sport? And what do they do to prepare themselves for the crossover?

The reasons vary when you ask the athletes, doctors, golf pros and enthusiasts.

Some say a competitive nature brings them here to NBC's big golf stage. Another observer said the ability to excel in yet another sport motivates them. Others said the network encourages them with the promise of fun and frolic.

Former Pittsburgh Steelers running back Jerome Bettis, aka "The Bus," told Lake Tahoe News on a conference call this week that his reason runs a little deeper.

The sixth all-time leading rusher in NFL history, who will be inducted Aug. 8 into the Hall of Fame, explained how he feels he's in good company with other Hall of Fame entrants. He enjoys the camaraderie of what he calls "a fraternity and brotherhood" over their accomplishments.

"You definitely feel you're in great company and more so with hall of famers. You have a respect from all these guys. You know what it took to get there. These are the most competitive bunch of guys I've ever seen," said Bettis, who got his nickname while playing at Notre Dame. (Note: Pittsburgh games bring out a huge Fighting Irish following.)

The football great has shown he's willing to not only compete against his own brother, but in another sport beyond football and golf. They bowled.

Bettis recalled with affection how his family is so tight knit, especially given the struggles. The brothers lost their father and now are enduring their mother having cancer.

"It's a special weekend for us because of the journey we've

taken. Our mother and father have never missed a game the entire time I played in the NFL," Bettis said. He added how he and his mother were both crying when he got the news of his Hall of Fame induction. Bettis' brother will introduce him during the ceremony.

To Oakland Raider receiver Tim Brown, another inductee this year, the competition on such a stage is what brings him out to the golf course.

"This tournament is the only one of its kind. There's nothing like Lake Tahoe. You go out there and think 'I'm going to beat this guy.' You can't get this on the football field," Brown told Lake Tahoe News on a conference call. To cross over to golf, Brown said he walks a lot, but admitted "I'd die" if he walked a lot at his home in Texas where the temperatures are scorching hot.

Another new participant this year, Steeler wide receiver Hines Ward, said he relishes the competition of golf.

"I wished I would've started golf a long time ago. We're trying to work on my game," the two-time Super Bowl champion said of his fellow teammate Bettis. The two have become close off the field.

So perhaps golf is more than a place for sales executives to solidify a deal. It can be a place for kinship among other athletes.

That's at least what Phil Weidinger, spokesman for the tournament and a golfer, believes goes on with the players.

"Where else are you going to play with this guy?" Weidinger said, illustrating the uniqueness of the tournament.

Most of the Hall of Fame players hit the course for fun, but some have winning in their back of their minds, like San Francisco 49er receiver Jerry Rice.

“He works on this. That’s his goal – to win this thing,” Weidinger said of the well-liked participant. “There are four to five hall of famers who could win this thing.”

Overall, Weidinger estimated about a dozen of the 93 participants have a shot at it.

And this friendly competition and the fierce competitive nature is just what the sports network is going for with inviting these hall of famers. Besides the exposure of bringing out an athlete at the top of their game gains much of the attraction, Weidinger pointed out.

“You have to have the skills – the skills that are inherent to any pro player or any college player and apply to any sport,” Mike Fry, physician with Tahoe Fracture & Orthopedic Medical Clinic, told Lake Tahoe News of the crossover these athletes make on the golf course.

Fry cited the sports figures’ mental game as coming into play.

“Most of these guys compete with personality. That’s what makes them succeed at what they do,” Fry said.

To fellow golfer Randy Fox, hall of famers in other sports competing on the golf course seems natural. Their intensity, competitive spirit and household name give NBC reason to attract viewers by bringing them on screen.

“Hall of gamers, along with many other athletes take up the game of golf. They all have very good hand eye coordination and with being very competitive individuals. Many excel in the game of golf and become very good golfers. Lots of celebrities from numerous occupations try to get into this event, but NBC chooses the players they feel will create the most interest,” said Fox, who is manager of Edgewood Tahoe pro shop. He attributes the anticipated interest as a reason for the increased number of Hall of Fame participants.

Hall of Fame participants in the July 14-19 celebrity golf tournament: Marcus Allen, Charles Barkley, Jerome Bettis, Tim Brown, John Elway, Marshall Faulk, Tom Glavine, Greg Maddux, Mike Modano, Jerry Rice, Joe Sakic, Emmitt Smith, Ozzie Smith, John Smoltz and Steve Young.