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GOLF

Els taking lessons during rookie season on PGA Tour Champions

By Randy Youngman
Correspondent

NEWPORT BEACH » When World Golf Hall of Famer Ernie Els turned 50 and joined PGA Tour Champions this year, the four-time major champion said he was looking forward to renewing acquaintances with, and competing against, familiar faces in a relaxing atmosphere.

But Els was jolted by reality in the first round of his first Champions event, the Mitsubishi Electric Championship at Hualalai in Hawaii. Even with the ocean waves crashing in the background, it didn't take long to realize his "rookie" year on the new tour was not going to be a walk on the beach.

"I thought it was going to be a lot more relaxed," Els recalled earlier this week while preparing for the 25th Hoag Classic, which begins Friday at Newport Beach Country Club. "These guys are really, really competitive."

Instead of a family reunion, it felt more like the first day of class for a kid who just moved into the neighborhood. And Els got schooled.

First, normally laid-back Fred Couples, his first-round playing partner, was surprisingly intense, firing a 5-under 67 to beat Els by five shots. "Freddy was really into it," Els said. "I shot even par, which I thought was OK, but I was 30th in a field of 34."

In addition, 70-year-old Tom Watson, 20 years older than Els, shot a 69 — one



AMR NABIL — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ernie Els was 30th in his first PGA Tour Champions event, learning the tour is a lot more competitive than he'd thought.

under his age — to beat Els by three shots.

And that wasn't the only indignity. "I didn't beat Hale Irwin, either, and with all due respect, he's 74 years of age," said Els, grinning sheepishly as he elicited laughter from a packed ballroom where he was the featured breakfast speaker in a tournament function. "So it was quite a wake-up call for me."

"I didn't sleep very well that evening. I thought, 'This is quite embarrassing.'"

Els, after all, is a 19-time PGA Tour winner, including two U.S. Opens and two British Opens, with 47 other international titles and 300 career top-10s.

Appropriately motivated, Els bounced back by shooting 65-65 on the weekend at Hualalai to get into a three-way playoff with Couples and Miguel Angel Jimenez, who won the trophy with a birdie on the second extra

hole.

But suffice to say Els learned a valuable lesson in his first Champions event.

"I've got my work cut out for me," he said.

Last week, in his second Champions event—the Cologuard Classic in Tucson—Els learned another lesson.

He learned that perennial Schwab Cup champion Bernhard Langer, another World Golf Hall of Famer, is still the driving force on the tour, even at age 62.

Langer shot 8-under in the final round to win by two shots, racking up his 41st career Champions title, four shy of Irwin's career record. Even more remarkably, it was Langer's eighth Champions title since turning 60, a runaway tour record.

Even though the window to contention on PGA Tour Champions historically has been 50-55 years of age, Langer has won 23 titles since the age of 57. He's also

won two or more titles in the past eight seasons and at least one in each of his 14 years on PGA Tour Champions.

"I'm trying to go against the grain . . . swim against the flow," a smiling Langer said Wednesday, taking a break on the driving range at Newport Beach Country Club. "Well, I always say there are exceptions (to the rules), right? There are always exceptions."

"Tom Watson was an exceptional player; he almost won the British Open when he was close to 60. And Hale Irwin is one of those (with 42 Champions titles in his 50s). Hopefully, I'll be one of those where I defeat the normal rules or expectations or whatever you call it. They say once you're 55 out here, you don't win much anymore. I've proven that wrong already, so hopefully I can prove a few more things wrong, give some hope to the older guys, whether amateur or pro."

In the meantime, Els just hopes to establish himself as a contender on his new tour. Unlike other 50-something players such as Davis Love III, Vijay Singh and Steve Stricker, all of whom have not yet committed to playing fulltime on PGA Tour Champions, Els says he plans to focus on his new tour.

"I need to get focused and really put my energy into this. I need to focus on the Champions tour," Els said. "When you shift your focus, that's when you can do your best work. But I'll tell you, these guys can play."