

Big-hitter Daly a big hit on Longboat Key

Most PGA Tour players do not want any part of John Daly's past, but they have to be envious of his future.

Next to Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson, Daly is the most popular player in golf. Despite his marital problems and alcohol abuse, sponsors love the former winner of the British Open and PGA Championship.

There's good reason for that. In a sport filled with wealthy country club types, Daly can relate to the common person. Nowhere was that more evident than this past weekend when he showed up at the All-Star Children's Foundation Celebrity Golf and Gala Tournament for abused, neglected and abandoned children at the Longboat Key Club in jeans, smoking a cigarette and drinking a beer.

"I've never been here," he said, taking a break from socializing with the dignitaries. "Friends of mine in Memphis with the Stanford Group asked me to come, so I did. Why not? I'm not doing anything."

The Stanford Group is the primary sponsor for the 3-year-old foundation, which raises mega-bucks for child abuse.

Daly was a perfect partner for the weekend events. He danced, played guitar and sang with the Greg Billings Band with guest musicians Donald "Duck" Dunn and special guest Brian Johnson of AC/DC on Friday night. Then he belted tee shots for each foursome Saturday. The rock 'n' rollers and golfers loved it.

It was typical of why PGA Tour sponsors like inviting him to their tournaments. And that's the reason he can play the PGA Tour without going back to qualifying school.

With a nagging shoulder injury, he finished 188th on the money list in 2007. He needed to get into the top 125 to keep his Tour card.

"I'm going on sponsors' exemptions," Daly said. "As many as I can get."

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Is PGA qualifying school in his future?

"No, not right now," he said. "I am a lifetime member of the European Tour for winning the British, which wouldn't be that bad if I don't get exemptions on our tour. I can go play overseas."

For now, Daly, who played 10 straight weeks at the end of the season, is taking a break.

"I am so close to playing good but the injuries this year just killed me," he said. "That separated shoulder hurt me. I just want to get it going again. I'm taking some time off. I'll go out West right after Christmas and work my butt off. Probably just work on 100 yards and in. Chipping and putting... concentrating on that real hard."

One thing Daly does not have to work on is his driving. At age 41, he still ranks No. 2 in driving distance. Nobody gets the clubhead back any farther than Daly, and he does it so effortlessly.

"It's really natural," he said. "When I started playing, I was 4 and I had a men's set of clubs. When I took it back, it almost hit the ground. I developed a swing."

The last time Daly won was the 2004 Buick Invitational. Before that, his last victory was the 1995 British Open before Woods started dominating the game.

"He's phenomenal," said Daly. "The thing that separates Tiger from everybody else is his putting. If you put

Ben Crenshaw or Jack Nicklaus in their prime, they couldn't come within two or three putts per round against Tiger. Ninety-nine percent of the time, he is just kicking the you-know-what out of everybody."