

On the Rise: 5 Phoenix Open Golfers to Know

Written by Melissa Larsen

Meet five up-and-coming PGA Tour talents (most are celebrating their rookie year!) who you'll see take the course at this month's Waste Management Phoenix Open.

Andrew Loupe



How did you get your start in the game? My parents. Early on, I showed some athleticism, and they put a plastic club in my hand. I would whack a plastic ball around the house. As I grew older, I would use my father's cut-down clubs, and he would take me out to play. Those are my earliest memories, being 5-years-old.

The Waste Management Phoenix Open has the reputation for being one of the more fun stops. What are you most looking forward to? I played it last year. I Monday qualified. I got bad food poisoning right before the tournament. I had a couple of IVs after the first round. But I think it is awesome. There are few tournaments that have massive crowds, and Phoenix is one of them. It is rowdy, and 16 is awesome. It is like playing in a stadium. The louder the better. I think is great.

What is your favorite course? I have to say Pebble Beach. It is so majestic. I don't think I am the only one that would say Pebble. Monterey Country Club is also one of my favorites.

Who is your biggest mentor? Chuck Winstead; he was my college coach. I have known him for a long time. He has a very high golf IQ. He gives me great golf advice, as well as life advice. He is 20 years older than me; it is a perfect age gap. If I ever have a question, he is usually the first person I call.

Do you have any rituals prior to competing? It is getting out of control; I should tone it back a bit. I use a quarter every time, and I mark it on heads every time unless I have an eagle putt and then I will mark it on tails. Sometimes if I can't buy one, I will start marking it on tails.

Off the course, where can we find you? I love to fish. I went the other day, and went out in the marsh in the Gulf of Mexico, south of New Orleans. That is probably my favorite thing to do, if I had several hours to do something. I love sports, especially basketball. I like going to sporting events. I like to play basketball, but I am conservative with ankles and knees.

What are your goals for 2016? I want to be a more consistent golfer. I want to win a golf tournament. I want my preparation to be more consistent. I want to learn from past experiences. I really want to see some improvement.

Harold Varner



Congrats on your rookie year! What is that like being on the PGA Tour? It is good. It is good. I am enjoying myself for sure.

How did you get your start in the game? My dad played golf. Being around him, he played every Sunday. I got a little hook to it, but he introduced me to the game.

The Waste Management Phoenix Open has the reputation for being one of the more fun stops. What are you most looking forward to? Just playing in front of that many people going nuts. I think that is going to be pretty fun because I would be one of those people going nuts if I wasn't playing golf.

What is your favorite course? Pebble Beach is right up there. I played there once. There are a lot of good ones; Quail Hallow is pretty good in Charlotte.

Who is your biggest mentor? My college coach. Also, my dad.

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Do you have any rituals prior to games? None. Zero, actually.

Off the course, where can we find you? At the local bar, probably. Either that or on the golf course wherever I am at.

What are your goals for 2016? Just retaining my card, more than anything. I want to win.

Peter Malnati



How did you get your start in the game? I have a unique story. I was born in Indiana and moved to a very rural area of Tennessee when I was 13-months-old. One of our neighbors he was an old man—and he wouldn't mind me saying that—and he got my dad into golf a bit. My dad is a great athlete. He was the first person who ever took me to a golf course. That was the first time I ever played. He convinced my dad to join a golf course. When I was 8-years-old, my parents joined the golf course and every day when my dad came home from work, we would go play nine holes. I owe it all my crazy neighbor, John.

The Waste Management Phoenix Open has the reputation for being one of the more fun stops. What are you most looking forward to? I would be lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to the stadium atmosphere on No. 16. I have never experienced anything quite like that. I always thought it was cool that—at baseball games, football—it was cool to be surrounded by thousands of fans and get out there playing a game. Golf is my job, my profession, but I feel like I am just playing a game. I am really excited about it. I am really excited about stepping on the tee at No. 16 for the first time—I don't even care if I get booed.

What is your favorite course? I think Pebble Beach is the most special place. The setting, the scene. It is so special, and I enjoy the view there.

Who is your biggest mentor? As far as people who are playing, some people I have looked up to is Zach Johnson for the way he plays and the success he has had. I think he is really courageous. He uses the tools he has and uses them to the best of his ability. He plays to his strengths. That is something I admire; he doesn't try to be anything he's not. I wouldn't call him a mentor, but I look up to him.

Do you have any rituals prior to games? Every golfer has some superstitions; we are all kind of a crazy bunch. I don't really know of anything I do that is that is odd or eccentric, but I know we all have our little quirks.

Off the course, where can we find you? I'm actually at this point in my career when I just love to practice. It doesn't wear me out. I spend most of my daylight hours at the course. When I am not golfing, I like doing just about anything with my wife, except shopping—I don't like to shop. I like to explore new cities. That doesn't give you much instruction if you're looking for me because I don't know where I'll be.

What are your goals for 2016? I am motivated to win again and get an invitation to Augusta [for the Masters]. I have some really positive momentum, and it is a Ryder Cup year. It is a lofty goal of mine, but I want to be considered for the Ryder Cup.

Smylie Kaufman



Congrats on your rookie year! What is that like being on the PGA Tour? It is something I have always worked for. This is my dream come true. I have played some great tournaments this year. I am looking forward to developing as a golfer and achieving all the dreams that I want to.

How did you get your start in the game? Both of my parents played collegiate golf at Louisiana State University, where I played. I created a passion for it by myself, but I had parents that were a great influence.

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The Phoenix Open is the one besides the Majors the one I am looking forward to this year. It is crazy, and I like atmospheres like that. It is going to be really cool. I have never played in front of that many people, especially people that are yelling at you sometimes. It will be a little different but a fun experience for me.

What is your favorite course? It really doesn't matter to me. Golf is golf, but I do like Jack Nicklaus golf courses.

Who is your biggest mentor? My dad. I have a great team around me, but I think my dad is the one I can talk to and give me good advice.

Off the course, where can we find you? Probably in front of a TV, watching "SportsCenter." Nothing too crazy. I do like to keep a basketball in my hand to dribble around the house, shoot into my little mini hoop.

What are your goals for 2016? I am going to try to win Rookie of the Year and to win a game on the PGA Tour wouldn't hurt either.

Will Wilcox



How did you get your start in the game? My mom was a golfer—she was a teaching professional and probably could have played. I learned from her every day when I was younger. I wasn't football size, so golf was a good fit.

The Waste Management Phoenix Open has the reputation for being one of the more fun stops. What are you most looking forward to? Just the whole thing. It has been a bucket list tournament for every guy that plays. You have to earn your way there. Now that I have been able to do that, it is a dream come to play on the 16.

What is your favorite course? Pebble Beach is awesome. I like Spyglass. St. Andrew's is the most fun.

Who is your biggest mentor? My mom taught me how to play. At this point, there are a few players I look [up to]. I just kind of look at how Tiger went about his golf. He worked really hard. The Tiger method of preparing to do your best is probably what I look up to more than anything.

What are your goals for 2016? To me, I will try to build on last year, keeping my card and keeping status on the tour. It was a lifelong goal, and I was able to do that. I had a good year in 2015. I like to hang around all year and have the chance to win.

Do you have any rituals prior to games? I take a fairly chilled approach to it. I shop up a little late. I am not rushing to get to my tee time. I warm up for 20, 25 minutes. I try not to over-analyze anything.

What does a warm up consist of for you? Do a little stretch in the hotel room. Get a nice meal in. Ten or 15 minutes of stretching and hitting balls for 15 or 20 minutes. Maybe a couple chips, a couple of puts.

Off the course, what do you love to do? I like the beach; I live in Jupiter, Fla. I am a beach-goer. I am on the water a lot. I spend a lot of time in the Caribbean; I like the beach scene. It was always something I was drawn to.