

Wednesday, July 13, 2011

NBC Golf Executives Mix Business with Pleasure in Tahoe

South Shore, Lake Tahoe, Nev. – Michael Jordan and Tony Romo had never met before the American Century Championship four years ago. It was golf that brought them together.

Now they were walking down the 11th fairway during Wednesday's practice round talking about golf equipment and what Jordan might try to get a bit more lift on his drives without losing distance.

If any celebrity out here might know, it's Romo, a scratch amateur golfer and the Dallas Cowboys quarterback who finished his practice round at Edgewood Tahoe Golf Course with a 2-under-par 70. The ever-competitive Jordan wasn't far behind.

"He's got youth on his side," quipped Jordan on the third tee when the 31-year-old Romo launched his drive far down the fairway and had only a 5-iron into the 570-yard par 5.

And it was Romo, who teamed with NBC executive Jon Miller and announcer Mark Rolfing to win the friendly game among the five. Jordan and lead producer Tom Randolph dug into their pockets to settle the bet.

The friendly game has been a ritual among Jordan, Romo and the NBC group each year since 2007 at the American Century Championship, largely as a way to celebrate the success of the event which grew out of misfortune for the network more than 20 years ago.

"It was 1989. We had just lost major league baseball and (president) Dick Ebersol called me in his office," recalled Miller, now president of programming for NBC Sports and the Versus network. "You're the programming guy. We just lost baseball and you now have 26 weeks to fill. But you have no money to spend."

The network was open to many new ventures in sports to fill the void. One of the ideas was a celebrity golf tournament.

"Let's give it a shot," Miller thought. "This event was the first and most successful of those ventures. But we knew we needed the biggest star of that time to make it go, and that was Michael."

He said yes, and so a good friendship was born.

Randolph recalls the time he first asked Jordan what they were going to play for. "Anything that makes you nervous," said the NBA great.

"I look forward to this. It's one of the best weeks of the year," said Jordan. And it's always special when he gets to trade jabs with his buddy Rolfing.

"Michael could play 1000 rounds of golf, but there is nobody he likes taking money from more than me," said Rolfing, who came alive on the closing holes Wednesday to win his individual wager with Jordan.

"He got away clear," chuckled Jordan, who started off with birdies on two of the first three holes.

Romo, meanwhile, walked away from the day knowing he was prepared for the rest of the golf week before he turned his attention (hopefully) to another football season. Talks are continuing between team owners and players to end a player lockout.

"I like my chances," said the three-time Pro Bowl selection.

So does Jordan.

By Craig Smith, former director of media relations for the U.S. Golf Association.