

A Kiss for the Claret Jug



Icon Sports

Todd Hamilton took the long way around on the road from Sooner star to British Open champion, with many an obstacle testing his resolve.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

There was real passion in the obligatory kiss 2004 British Open champion Todd Hamilton bestowed on the tournament's trophy, the Claret Jug.

Grant Waite was not sure what to make of his new roommate, despite the fact the pair had played on the same golf team for almost a year. The quiet 19-year-old New Zealander was moving a few doors down the first-floor hall at the Jefferson House athletic dormitory; there a rather stoic Yank named Todd Hamilton already was unpacking his bags.

The two young men from different corners of the world seemed a strange choice for roomies, but the University of Oklahoma's men's golf coach, David Yates, never wavered on his decision. *continued*

“When I got home, I told my parents I was going to OU. I really never had a second choice. Once I saw what OU was all about, I was hooked.”

“I realized Grant and Todd were the ultimate odd couple, in golf and in life,” says Yates, recounting the circumstances of autumn 1984. “They were completely different people from different cultures, but there was something that told me it would work.”

Both Hamilton and Waite had played their way into OU’s starting lineup as freshmen, and that meant they had spent plenty of time together, at least on the golf course. The move to room 104 would give them an opportunity to get to know each other away from the game.

At least that was the plan.

“Honestly, Todd was hard to get to know. He was quiet and fairly reserved, and he came across as being a little aloof,” says Waite. “It was a bit uncomfortable at first, but once we spent a little more time together, we got on very well.”

In fact, the pair became almost inseparable. When Hamilton wasn’t hanging out with his high school sweetheart and future wife, Jaque—he could be found palling around with Waite at local landmarks like the Hideaway and O’Connell’s Irish Pub.

Their blossoming friendship was also a springboard to bigger and better things in golf. Both players saw their talents flourish as sophomores, and they began to discuss and nurture dreams of some day playing on the PGA Tour.

While their immediate sights were set on helping the Sooners win Big Eight Conference titles and national championships, Hamilton and Waite harbored goals that extended well into the future.

Fast forward 20 years to the British Open in Troon, Scotland.

Hamilton finds himself in a final-round battle with the best players in the world. Millions watch as the former OU star calmly strolls the fairways and greens of golf’s grandest stage, making clutch shot after clutch shot.

And when the dust finally settles at the end of a four-hole playoff to decide the 2004 British Open champion, it is Hamilton standing at the top of the heap, Claret Jug in hand and the world at his feet.



OU Athletics Media Relations

Landing Todd Hamilton, from tiny Oquawka, Illinois, was a recruiting coup in 1983 for Coach David Yates’ Sooner golf team. Hamilton lived up to expectations as a three-time collegiate All-American.

The loudest applause may have come from the clubhouse at En-Joie Golf Course in Endicott, New York, on the other side of the Atlantic. Moments after completing his final round at the B.C. Open, Waite settled in front of a TV set with hopes of watching an old friend make history.

“I was so thrilled to see Todd play like he did,” says Waite, a 14-year veteran of the

PGA Tour. “That’s such a special accomplishment. Of the thousands and thousands of players who have played the game, there are only a privileged few who can say they’ve won a major championship. Todd is one of those players.”

“After all he has been through, no one deserves it more.”

While Waite made an expeditious leap from the collegiate ranks to the PGA Tour, Hamilton was not so fortunate. In fact, he failed seven times over a 15-year period (1986-2001) to gain his playing privileges at Tour Qualifying School.

Hamilton’s dream of honing his skills on the PGA Tour would have to wait almost two decades before he finally earned his card in December 2003, thus making him a 38-year-old rookie in 2004.

Despite his lack of success on American soil, Hamilton was not without his share of successes elsewhere. From 1992 to 2003, he won over a dozen professional titles around the world, including 11 on the Japanese Tour.

“Everything I did in Japan, especially the last year (2003) when I won four times, helped pave the way to getting back over here and playing with the best players in the world. And that had always been my dream,” says Hamilton. “I already knew how to win, but I learned about patience and how to better manage my game during my time overseas.”

The other motivating factor came partially from Hamilton’s former college roommate. Waite won his first PGA Tour event in 1994, while ex-teammates like Andrew Magee and Craig Perks also were experiencing great Tour success.

“Seeing guys like Grant, Andrew, Craig and Doug (Martin) out there on the PGA Tour doing well helped keep the dream alive,” says Hamilton. “I was just happy this year getting my card—that was special for me.”

But things escalated in a hurry when Hamilton birdied the final two holes to earn his first Tour victory at the Honda Classic in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, on February 14, 2004. Suddenly, all of the years of waiting and wondering seemed worth it.



Members of the 2004-2005 OU men's golf team gather around their most famous PGA Tour alumnus, Todd Hamilton, center, at halftime of the OU-Bowling Green football game.

"There's probably a lot of other golfers who deserve it more talent-wise, but I guarantee you no one will appreciate it more than I will," he said afterward.

Waite agrees.

"For Todd, it was just a matter of time before he completely found his game. He paid his dues, and even though he experienced a lot of success in Japan, he never lost sight of his ultimate goal," he explains.

Five months after finding the winner's circle in Florida, Hamilton pulled off the unimaginable by winning the British Open championship. The victory came with a \$1.3 million paycheck, but it was worth so much more. It vaulted Hamilton into the world rankings' top 20 and earned him a five-year exemption in all four majors and on the PGA Tour.

"I always thought something good would happen once I got here, but I never expected it to happen this quickly. Honestly, it seems a little like a fairy tale,"

Todd Hamilton put his British Open trophy, the Claret Jug, on display beside the stadium's Reflecting Pool for fans at the first home football game on September 4, 2004.

explains Hamilton, whose major surprise also earned him guest appearances on "Late Night with David Letterman" and "The Jim Rome Show," among others.

Not too bad for a kid from tiny Oquawka, Illinois, who went on to earn All-



ident of Gaylord Sports Management.

"After Andrew Magee drove Todd to the airport, I asked what our chances were, and Andrew said there was no way the kid was coming to OU."

But Hamilton had other ideas.

"I was kind of a shy, quiet person—not very outspoken on many things. I may not have shown it, but I enjoyed all of the guys during my weekend in Norman. Coach Yates was awesome, and it was such a great atmosphere," says Hamilton, who turned 39 in October. "When I got home, I told my parents I was going to OU. I really never had a second choice. Once I saw what OU was all about, I was hooked.

"I didn't go there for the golf course or for the weather. I went there for the people and what I thought was a very good golf program."

According to Waite, Hamilton's 2004 accomplishments should prove beneficial on several levels.

"I was so nervous watching those final few holes at the British Open. I wanted so badly for Todd to win," adds the Kiwi half of the odd couple. "He had a chance to climb the mountain, and he took advantage of it. That's incredible.

"It's great for Todd, and it's great for Sooner golf."

America honors three times at Oklahoma—even though Yates did not think the Sooners had a chance of landing Hamilton out of high school.

"Todd came in on a football weekend, and he basically didn't say a word the whole time he was here. The guys took him to the game and showed him the campus and the facilities, but he just didn't seem impressed," explains Yates, now executive vice presi-