

Kah-Nee-Ta pro was once a junior prodigy

By Zack Hall / *The Bulletin*

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WARM SPRINGS —

Austin Maki speaks with a laid-back, almost surferlike accent.

He has a Marlboro dangling from his lips, and his hair is well-gelled. His golf shoes look to have been swiped from the 1990s film “Swingers.”

But Maki’s exterior belies an uncommon golf talent.

Maki, Kah-Nee-Ta High Desert Resort and Casino’s new teaching professional, was once the equal of junior golfers that would become the best of this generation.

The 36-year-old Maki once nearly matched David Duval shot for shot in the most prestigious junior tournament in the country, and he earned Southern California junior golfer of the year honors over the younger Tiger Woods.

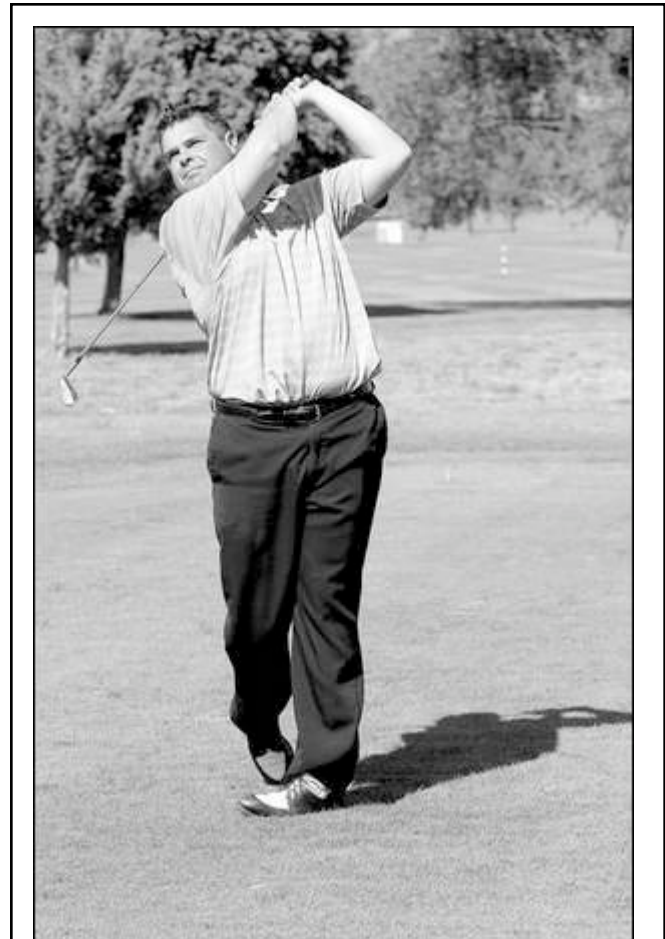
But that is where the similarities end between the Costa Mesa, Calif., product and his more famous counterparts.

Maki never reached the PGA Tour, and he spent nearly a decade outside of competitive golf. Instead, he played on a handful of mini-tours and worked for a time painting boats and building advertising billboards in Southern California.

Now Maki is back in golf full time, setting up an instructional program at Kah-Nee-Ta with his friend and former high school teammate — Kah-Nee-Ta head professional Ryan Davis — while sharpening his skills to play at the top levels of the sport once again.

“I never really did get a chance to go year-round (with golf),” Maki says. “A job like this, I can make this my home base and play year-round finally for the first time in a lot of years.”

It seems odd that a golfer of Maki’s talent never played on the PGA or Nationwide tours — at least until you meet him



Melissa Jansson / *The Bulletin*

Austin Maki, a teaching professional at Kah-Nee-Ta, takes a swing on the course on Friday.

and realize that everything about Maki is different.

He likes to keep things simple, even if that means missing out on potentially millions of dollars and fame on the PGA Tour.

An admitted homebody, Maki would have rather stayed close to home and play golf at a local course than grinding out a pro career while missing days on the links by traveling from city to city, he says.

“I think what it was for me is that I made a goal a long time ago before I turned 18,” Maki says. “My goal was to be able to play golf every day. Whether I am making my living climbing ladders and fixing billboards, painting, doing home repairs, teaching golf or playing golf, it doesn’t matter, because I am going to be golfing anyways. And that’s what my goal is. Whatever career allows me to keep playing golf, that’s great.”

Playing golf is something Maki has done nearly every day since he started playing at 13.

And he has the ability to hit all the shots.

Maki can blast a ball 330 yards off the tee. And he can put uncanny spin on a ball to make it go left or right — or to make it stop on a dime when needed.

Maki doesn’t play a golf course as much as he dissects it — constantly thinking a shot ahead.

It’s a technique common among the best golfers in the world, and Maki augments it with a near photographic memory and a professor’s understanding of physics and geometry.

“He got 100 percent in physics all through high school and college,” Davis says. “That math background is different from the everyday golfer. He looks at geometry and angles, and that makes him an elite player because of his mathematical mind and photographic memory.

“He could probably tell you every club he has ever hit in every high school match, and what the temperature was that day and stuff like that,” Davis adds. “That has to help.”

Maki says he took to the sport quickly and was a scratch golfer by his 16th birthday.

He grew up during a golden era of Southern California golf.

It was a time in the late 1980s and early 1990s when that region produced the two best golfers of this generation — Woods and Phil Mickelson — and countless other future touring professionals.

And Maki wasn’t just a spectator watching the exploits of the prodigies. He was their equal.

In 1989, he helped all-star teams from Southern California win the America’s Cup and Eddie Hogan Cup — a tournament with Oregon roots that pits the best junior golfers from around the West.

As a senior in 1990 at Estancia High School in Orange County’s Costa Mesa, Maki won the California Interscholastic Federation-Southern California Golf Association Four Section Tournament.

It was an important tournament in Southern California that showcased the best high school golfers in the state. The list of champions includes San Diego’s Mickelson, who won in 1987, and Orange County’s Woods, who won the tournament

as a high school freshman in 1991.

“In other parts of the country, it may be easier to be a star,” Maki says. “It was a lot harder to stand out in Southern Cal.”

But Maki was a star, and he was named to the 1989 American Junior Golf Association's All-America team that included future PGA Tour champions David Duval, Justin Leonard and Stewart Cink. That same year, Maki nearly beat a 17-year-old Duval, who would become the No. 1 player in the world more than a decade later.

In the championship match of the 1989 U.S. Junior Amateur at Singing Hills Golf and Country Club near San Diego, Maki went shot for shot with the young star, gaining the upper hand on the first hole before losing three holes on the back nine. Maki fought back with a birdie on No. 17, he recalls, but he was eventually put away by Duval after Maki's birdie putt on 18 — a putt that would have forced extra holes — lipped out.

“We were back and forth all day,” Maki says. “I had him early, but I was too excited.”

After high school, Maki went to the University of Arizona on a golf scholarship. But bored with school, he says, he turned pro in 1992, just months before the Pac-10 Conference school won the national championship in men's golf.

But Maki's touring pro career never panned out. He spent several years on various mini-tours, but he quickly grew weary of the travel.

He moved back to Southern California, working odd jobs and, most days, playing golf.

Maki still taught golf part time, but he stopped golfing competitively.

“After a couple years, I just missed my family and friends a lot so I quit traveling as much,” Maki says. “It wasn't until right before I turned 30 that I wanted to compete again.”

Maki played and won some minor California tournaments in the late 1990s, but he didn't travel outside of California for a golf tournament until last year. He played on the Dakotas Tour last summer, earning money in six of the seven tournaments he played. And Maki finished 18th in the Wells Fargo Nebraska PGA Open, a local professional tournament similar to the Oregon Open.

Maki's plans changed when Davis was named the head pro at Kah-Nee-Ta earlier this year. Davis called on his old high school teammate to start an instructional program at the casino-resort.

It was a perfect way for Maki to get back into golf full time, help his friend, and compete in Oregon Chapter PGA events to improve his game.

“If it wasn't for Ryan, I wouldn't have done it. He's the reason why I am here,” Maki says. “I love to teach, and I always have. But I love to compete as well. Being here gives me the opportunity to do both, so as long as they'll have me I will stay, especially with Ryan here.”

Maki will play in Oregon Chapter PGA pro events this summer, and he will attempt to make it through the qualifiers at the West Coast Nationwide Tour stops in Eugene, Idaho, California and Utah this fall.

Maki is vague about whether he will make a run at the PGA Tour again. But Davis, for one, believes that his friend will once again play against the best in the sport.

“Tiger, Duval, they all know who he is,” Davis says. “It’s just a matter of getting reunited with them.”

And if that day happens, Maki won’t be intimidated. He says he’s improved his game since he was considered one of the nation’s elite juniors, even if he doesn’t have the tournament hardware to prove it.

“I can still beat them, it’s not a big deal,” Maki says. “My goal was never to be a millionaire or famous. My goal was play golf every day. A lot of those guys don’t even get to do that.”

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