

Published June 27th, 2018

Ryan Burnett - Campolindo Golfer on the way to North Carolina

By Jon Kingdon



Ryan Burnett tees off hole 9 at Chukyo Golf Club in Toyota-shi, Japan. Photo provided

At the Campolindo High School graduation, they were short one student: Ryan Burnett. His absence was not due to a failing grade or an overlooked term paper, nor was it any type of silent protest on his part. Burnett was off on a little golf outing, competing in the Toyota Junior Golf World Cup, only 5,293 miles away in Toyota Shi, Japan.

This is a very prestigious tournament with 24 international teams competing. The teams came from the United States, Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain Sweden and Thailand. Besides Burnett, the United States team was made of three other players from Texas, South Carolina and North Carolina.

Burnett experienced more than golf at the tournament: "It was my first time in Japan and it was an amazing experience. There were golfers from different countries I played with in each of the four rounds. After playing, we would hang out with the other teams. For the most part, the only difference was that the Japanese and the Koreans, though very respectful, were a lot more serious and businesslike on the course."

In addition to the golf, the tournament organizers brought the participants to a middle school that Burnett found very interesting: "The kids were lined up holding all of the countries' flags. We saw a PE class where they were teaching sword fighting and archery along with basketball."

The love of golf for Burnett began at a young age, "when my uncle got me some plastic clubs. It was just fun to whack the ball. I got better and better at it and fortunately I had the patience to accept the bad shots, which is the hardest thing to handle when learning to play golf. It can be very frustrating experience."

Burnett also played football, baseball and swam competitively until the eighth grade, all of which Burnett enjoyed, particularly baseball: "Baseball really helped me with my hand-eye coordination," says Burnett. "That is the biggest part of golf and it is a strength of mine."

Burnett would join his parents (Steve and Liz), who also play golf well, at the driving range and they soon joined the Round Hill Country Club to further allow him to develop his game.

Burnett learned at an early age that he had a special affinity for golf: "I was 12 when I played in my first tournament and went on to win 8 or 9 of the tournaments I played that year."

Beating his father for the first time was also a milestone for Burnett: "When I was 12 years old, I played from one tee ahead of him and I shot a 38 for nine holes and he shot a 40. It was a quiet ride home but he was still filled with great pride."

When Burnett began high school at Campolindo his talent was a revelation to the schools' golf coaches, Steve Robinson and Gary O'Neal. Says O'Neal: "When Steve and I saw Ryan hitting great shot after great shot at the range, I asked him if he had an index (golf handicap). He said it was 0.8. We found a spot for him on the team. Besides being an honor student, Ryan has a very strong work ethic."

Burnett invests a great deal of time in his game: "After school, I would go right to the golf course and practice from one to six hours. I like to get up early in the summer and practice for a couple of hours and then play a round of golf. I also do a lot of stretching, lifting weights and rotation building exercises."

Even with all of the time invested in golf, Burnett did not ignore his studies at Campolindo: "I loved Campolindo and all the people there. I had a great group of friends and the academics were fantastic. With all of my tournament play, I had to miss 35 days of school this year but my teachers were very supportive and helpful. The time demands of golf may be the biggest of any sport. It's all about time management and knowing what you needed to do and then sticking to it."

With too many teachers for Burnett to acknowledge, he did single out two for special commendation: Trent Kauzer, his biology and AP Environmental Science teacher, and Caron Brownlee, who taught Contemporary Issues and Public Policy and Government and Economics. Says Burnett appreciatively: "They were always interested in what their students were doing, besides being awesome teachers and people."

With excellent grades and athletic talent, Burnett had his choice of a number of top schools and the recruiting process began his sophomore year in high school. For Burnett, the school had to be strong in academics and golf. That institution turned out to be the University of North Carolina. Says Burnett: "I knew I wanted to study business and they have one of the best undergraduate business programs in the country in addition to an amazing golf team. I hope to pursue professional golf, but I know that North Carolina will bring good opportunities my way regardless."

North Carolina's head coach Andrew DiBitetto is excited about Burnett's choice of North Carolina: "Ryan is an incredible young man that is determined and has an excellent work ethic which has turned him into one of the top juniors in the country. He has experience playing against the best junior golfers in the country and on some very difficult golf courses. Mentally, Ryan is very mature and steady, on and off the golf course, which is one of the many reasons he has performed well under bright lights as well as in the classroom."

Ironically, Burnett's most memorable victory came at a young age: "When I was 13, I was invited to the Junior World Championship in Southern California and gave up baseball to play in that tournament which I won in a playoff. It was the most satisfying win I ever had."

Burnett's first coach was Gary Bashford from the Round Hill Country Club: "I started with him when I was 11 and he is still my swing coach today. He just understood how to teach and build a kid from a young age and would then ratchet it up as I got older. My mentor that I play with at Round Hill is Cody Blick, who is on the Canadian Tour. I always looked up to him and now we are just really good friends. The coaches at Campolindo, Steve Robinson and Gary O'Neal are amazing people. They were always very supportive of everything I did. They volunteered their time and wanted to make all of us successful. It was an amazing environment to be around."

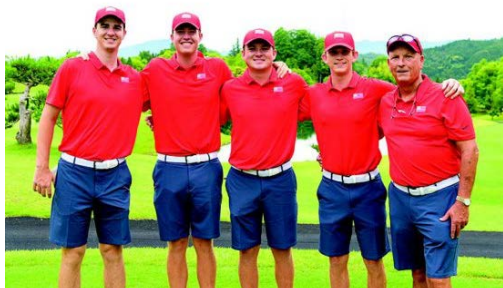
It was not just the coaches that helped Burnett: "As a freshman, there were two upperclassmen that took him under their wings," says Burnett. "Will Lagomarsino and Austin Fischer really helped me. They taught me a lot as a freshman transitioning to high school and introduced me to a lot of people in the golf world."

Burnett has been able to combine an ultra-competitive attitude with an ability to keep his equilibrium, a combination that works in life as well as golf: "There is a fire inside me and I expect a lot of myself. You have to understand that it's just golf. All over the country there are kids that allow their emotions to get the best of them. When my parents watch me play, even they can't tell whether I'm 5 under or 5 over par. There are two types of players, the one that get angry and the ones that use that anger for motivation."

It's an attitude that should carry Burnett far on the course and in life.



Team USA stands for the National Anthem as defending champions at the Opening Ceremonies of the Toyota Junior World Cup.



Boys Team USA. From left: Ryan Burnett, Michael Sanders, Reid Davenport, Jacob Bridgeman and coach Dave Jennings Photos provided

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