

UCF golf looks forward to 5th annual Isleworth event



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When Nick Clinard became the UCF men's golf coach in the summer of 2001, he inherited a program that needed some serious work.

The then-Golden Knights hadn't qualified for an NCAA regional since the 1995-96 school year, didn't have a decent practice facility and had a team grade-point average that hovered at 2.10.

"I kind of went through the first semester and I wondered, 'What did I get myself into?' " Clinard said.

He had a plan. He wanted to recruit better golfers, better students. He wanted to push for a better place to practice. Another key component was to create a golf tournament that would bring some of the best collegiate teams to the Orlando area and bring prestige to his own program.

That part of the dream has exceeded expectations. From Sunday through Tuesday, the fifth annual Isleworth-UCF Collegiate Invitational will be held at Isleworth Golf & Country Club. The field includes 12 of the top 25 teams in the most recent Golfweek/Sagarin Performance Index, including No. 1 Oklahoma State, No. 3 Illinois, No. 6 Southern California, No. 7 Georgia, No. 9 South Carolina and No. 10 Alabama.

"Just pulling through the gates at Isleworth Country Club, every kid who grows up and plays college golf knows Tiger Woods lives there," Clinard said.

"Everything's over the top. It's run like the Tavistock Cup or a PGA Tour event. Our goal, in conjunction with Tavistock, was to create four days of what it would be like to make the PGA Tour."

In the event's infancy, Clinard and the folks at Tavistock received a major boost from Wake Forest Coach Jerry Haas.

Haas and Clinard both played golf at Wake Forest, though at different times, and Haas has served as a mentor of sorts to Clinard. When Clinard asked Haas' Wake Forest program to help host the inaugural event, Haas was happy to help. Haas even called other college coaches to convince them to play in the tournament.

"It all stemmed from the Wake connection," Haas said.

"He's disciplined," Haas continued, referring to Clinard. "He knows what it takes to make it and not make it, and knows what he's looking for in recruiting, which is the most important thing."

Clinard has gotten results.

The Knights have reached an NCAA regional in four of the last five years, and Clinard said the team GPA was most recently at 3.20, the highest GPA for any men's team at UCF.

Within the next 60 days, the program also plans to open a new 2,880-square-foot building at its practice facility at Twin Rivers Golf Club in Oviedo.

The irony is that even as the Knights have improved in recent years, the team hasn't played well in the Isleworth-UCF Collegiate Invitational. Its seventh-place finish last year was its best yet in its own tournament.

"The kids can put extra pressure on themselves, which we don't want to happen, because they feel it's their home tournament," Clinard said. "I think they're just getting more comfortable playing that golf course and playing those types of teams."

The novelty of the Isleworth-UCF Collegiate Invitational might not wear off, though. It's not open to the public, though family and friends of the golfers are allowed to attend.

In addition, each player receives about \$350 worth of gifts, which is perfectly legal under NCAA rules and is reminiscent of the gifts given to college football players at bowl time. The gifts include Nike products and clothing from Ian Poulter's line. Head coaches even get \$300 from the Isleworth pro shop.

"We want to give them a taste of what it's like to be a professional," Clinard said.