



# Putting *for* Platoons

**The Patriot All-America Invitational pairs top college golfers with fallen military heroes in an unusual annual fundraiser. Somehow, it all works**

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**O**n paper, it sounds like an odd marriage: an invitational golf tournament featuring the best men's collegiate players coupled with a tribute to fallen and wounded military service men and women. Golfers representing every National Collegiate Athletic Association division, from schools all over the country and even the world, gather on a 54-hole championship course and surrender their golf bags to tote around new ones bearing the name and service branch of a fallen soldier.

Granted, golfers and soldiers have a few things in common: Both encounter their share of sand-filled bunkers, and each carries around an arsenal of iron. But as a theme, the combination of the two in the Patriot All-America Invitational, a one-of-a-kind annual fundraiser now in its ninth year at the Wigwam Resort in Litchfield Park, can smack more of an overstuffed turducken than a go-great-together chocolate and peanut butter cup. Just listen to Brigadier General Scott Pleus, 56th Fighter Wing commander





at Luke Air Force Base, try to make sense of the bonus prize for all the young golfers—a trip to Luke to meet the fighter pilots and crew.

“It’s an opportunity for them to learn a little bit about the sacrifices men and women in uniform make each and every day,” Pleus says in the tournament organizers’ promotional video, “which gives them the ability to go and play golf.”

Even Tom O’Malley, chief operating officer of JDM Partners, which has owned the Wigwam since 2008, initially had his doubts when organizers approached him with the concept for the holiday tournament.

“How do you get these top players while they’re in college and eyeing a pro career, and humble them into acknowledging that there are people out there fighting for their right to go out and make millions playing golf?” he asks. “We take their golf bags away—which are personal to them, they know where the pockets are, they’ve got their college team’s name on them—and we give each guy an identical red, white and blue golf bag embroidered



TOP: Players receive identical red, white and blue golf bags, each embroidered with the name of a fallen soldier; BOTTOM: Ed Gowan, Arizona Golf Association executive director; Cameron Champ, 2016 Patriot All-America Champion; and Tom O’Malley, JDM Partners chief operating officer



Players gathered in the Luke Air Force Base control tower in 2017 to watch F-16s and F-35s take off and land as staff explained their processes for managing aircraft





with the name of a fallen soldier. When we first started this, my biggest concern was ‘Will the kids even care?’”

Turns out, they did. “Everybody got it,” says Arizona Golf Association director Ed Gowan, who came up with the original idea along with Golf Coaches Association director Gregg Grost. “These kids recognize that a lot of the bags they’re carrying bear the names of people who are around their age. That’s impactful.”

Moreover, the business community got it. Adding the tribute to veterans proved to be an irresistible hook for potential sponsors. “All of a sudden we had a hotel, we had a golf course and we had the backing of the Coaches Association to get the attention of all the really good collegians around the country,” Gowan says. “The first year was an absolute home run. And things don’t happen that easily very often. So it must have been fated.”

Sponsorship has multiplied ever since. The list for this year’s tournament, which takes place December 28 through December 31, includes Valley Toyota Dealers, Nike, Titleist, Ping, Porsche North Scottsdale and a dozen additional high-profile backers.

“It’s bigger than just, ‘Hey, we’re raising money for a golf tournament,’” O’Malley says. “These sponsors get a lot of requests, but once I explain to them what this event’s about, the response is almost always, ‘How can we help?’”

In turn, the strong financial backing allows organizers to attract the best college golfers in America and internationally. “The coaches invite the golfers, and they start by looking at the top 100 players in the world,” says Erik Rasmussen, chair of the West Valley Mavericks Foundation, a charitable organization that raises money and

support for West Valley nonprofits. “They look at all three NCAA divisions, player rankings in the NAIA [National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics] and the NJCAA [National Junior College Athletic Association], and they even pull some players from Europe, Asia, Australia and South Africa. From that they choose the top 84.”

While there’s no cash purse for the winner (finishers receive only a trophy in the shape of an F-35 fighter jet), it’s become an influential invitational, producing more than its share of PGA players. “Six of the top 10 golfers in the world today played in our event,” O’Malley says. “Brooks Koepka, Justin Thomas, Daniel Berger, Bryson DeChambeau—a lot of these guys have gone on to amazing success.” Gowan includes Cameron Champ, who won the Patriot All-America in 2016, garnering him a spot on the 2017 Web.com Tour, which in turn earned him a PGA Tour card. “He’s now taking the golf world by storm,” Gowan says, “and he’s only been out there a couple of years.”

O’Malley suggests the pairing of the players with the military heroes encourages the golfers to take their game more seriously. “We had a fighter pilot one time look at a kid and say, ‘My best friend’s name is on that bag,’” O’Malley recalls. “He said, ‘You’re all going to have bad shots. You’re going to have bad holes. But just remember that someone else had a worse day than you—and that name is on your bag. And if I see one of you disrespect that bag, if I see you throw a club or hit your bag, I’m going to come out and beat you silly!’”

That drove the message home. “Immediately the kid got it, that he was playing for something bigger than himself,” says O’Malley. “That makes it meaningful.” ❖