

Nathan Crace's

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The Young Guns of the 2002 Tour

By: Nathan Crace Date: January 21, 2002

Perhaps not since Tiger's rookie year has there been so much buzz surrounding the budding careers of professional golf's newest Tour members. And the Tour is quick to take advantage of this opportunity to aggressively market these "rookies" in an attempt to draw more fans to the game. Surely you've seen the media hype, heard the stories, read the articles, and watched the commercials. Some concerned analysts say the age of this year's young guns is the big story. "It's hard to believe they're ready for this," some pundits muse. However, if the skill is there I say let them play! They know what's ahead of them and are well aware of what it will take to win. After all, while the level of competition they are about to undertake may be new to these players, they are no strangers to the pressure. Years of competitive golf have tempered their resolve and honed their skills. So what's all the fuss about? They are all adults right? In fact, most of them have children who are playing competitive golf. What's that? We must not be talking about the same thing? You thought I was talking about the PGA Tour's young guns? Sorry about the misunderstanding, but I'm talking about the rookies of the Senior PGA Tour! Sure the likes of Howell, Gossett, Donald, Kuchar and Tryon have the skills to stir things up this year with the younger crowd, but let's talk about the guys with a handful of Majors and dozens of Tour wins already under their collective belt!

In case you have managed to avoid the PGA's marketing machine lately, this year's rookie class has a couple of marquee names on its roll. Namely two "youngsters" named Zoeller and Crenshaw with no less than four Majors titles between them, including three green jackets from Augusta! But perhaps more important than their career records is the fact that the Senior Tour is about to get a shot in the arm from one of golf's most colorful characters. Frank Urban Zoeller (or Fuzzy as most people know him) turned 50 in November of 2001 and will hit the ground running this year. What makes the timing of Fuzzy's debut on the Senior Tour a potential goldmine for the PGA is a number of innovative and interesting changes beginning with the 2002 season. It seems that even with lucrative purses and more recognizable faces moving up, the Senior Tour is still vying to delineate itself from the other Tours and turn more television sets to Senior events. With that in mind, the Associated Press reports that Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem has announced the Senior PGA Tour's plan to test-market a handful of new strategies this year—one must assume to capitalize on this year's fresh new faces—including wiring players with microphones! Hopefully, the Tour will require microphones equipped with a five second delay to guard against the unanticipated expletives that seem to filter through the television set from existing on-course microphones these days. Of course if the microphone idea is well received, you can bet Fuzzy's will provide some of the more interesting sound bites from between the ropes.

And if Fuzzy isn't enough to get you to tune in for an extra dose or two of the Senior PGA Tour this year, another rookie named Crenshaw will soon be making his debut among the 50 and over crowd after his 50th birthday in January. Does anyone else think it's strange that the virtuoso of the flat stick—who won the Masters just seven years ago—will now be teeing it up with the older crowd? Crenshaw admits he has been spending a lot of quality time with his family the past four years or so and I for one say "Good for him." But I must admit, for those of us on the outside of the ropes, it will be good to see Ben on the course again—hopefully in contention. Now the only question that remains is "How long until he and Zoeller begin collecting additional hardware to add to their trophy cases?" Remember when Trevino first arrived on the Senior Tour? How about Irwin's rookie season? It seemed as though they won everything they entered. Trevino has won 29 times on the Senior circuit alone and Irwin 32 times with the over 50 crowd! As the years went on, more Senior Tour rookies began to not only elevate the level of competition, but also prove that there is a big difference between a 49 year-old man who has been battling the twenty and thirty something crowd on the regular Tour and a 50 year-old man who feels reborn as he suddenly finds himself to be the "young guy." Just look at all of the Senior Tour players with young children—younger than their tenure on the Senior Tour.

Although they may not have the same "star appeal" as Zoeller and Crenshaw, there are many more players poised for eligibility on the Senior Tour this year. Wayne Levi, Dave Barr, Dan Halldorson, and Bill Kratzert will all celebrate their 50th birthday this year and in November, both Mark Lye (The Golf Channel) and Gary Koch (NBC) will be eligible to make their move back from the golf analyst's seat to the short grass—with club in hand. Future years will see a flood of familiar names making the move up: Andy Bean, D.A. Weibring, Craig Stadler, and Jerry Pate in 2003; Peter Jacobsen in 2004; and Curtis Strange and the Shark himself—Greg Norman—in 2005. Though not members of the U.S. PGA Tour, both Seve Ballesteros and Nick Faldo will themselves be eligible in 2007. Then there's Tiger in 2025, Sergio in 2030, Ty Tryon in 2034...

Nathan Crace is the Senior Design Associate at Maxwell Golf Group in Jackson, Mississippi. His freelance "Lipouts" column is based on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed, log on to www.maxwellgolf.com/lipouts and let him know. Copyright 2002.