

LIMEHOUSE NATIVE PLAYING KEY ROLE IN RETURN OF PGA TOUR

TOTHE GUIDES FIRST TOURNAMENT BACK FROM COVID-19

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On Thursday, the PGA Tour will return to play at the Charles Schwab Challenge in Fort Worth, Texas.

It will be anything but business as usual. There will be as much talk about testing and physical distancing as there will be about bogeys and birdies. While most professional sports are still trying to figure out the logistics of returning to play, the PGA Tour is forging ahead.

The Charles Schwab Challenge will be a critical testing ground for future events and the man in charge of creating the blueprint is Limehouse native Michael Tothe.

The Acton High School grad has served as the tournament director since 2012, carrying on a tradition established in 1946 of PGA events at the Colonial Country Club. But that run looked to be in jeopardy when the PGA cancelled or moved every event before May 20. The Schwab Challenge was originally scheduled May 21.

Despite the uncertainty, Tothe continued to line up corporate sponsors, giving them the option of deferring their commitment to

2021 if the tournament wasn't held.

Then came the call from the PGA Tour, asking if they would be able to move their date back three weeks to become the first tournament since the Players Championship was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March.

"It was a little daunting at first with nine weeks to get ready," the 48-year-old said. "Then I thought, 'Let's do it.' We've got a great staff here and good community support."

Tothe grew up playing golf at the Club at North Halton, where his dad, Jack, was a member. Though he liked hockey, golf came easy to him.

School did not. "My high school grades were awful," said Tothe, who said he was later tested for dyslexia. But he was determined to continue his education and sent letters to 500 U.S. colleges. He got a golf scholarship at Shorter University in Georgia where he studied recreation management.

After graduating, he began working for the American Junior Golf Association, organizing tournaments. He returned home to run Golf Canada's (then the Royal Canadian Golf Association) amateur championships for four years. After two years working in Singapore, he moved to Texas when his wife Holly was offered a job

as a golf coach in her hometown of San Antonio.

Tothe began working at Colonial and became tournament director for the PGA event the club hosts each year eight years ago.

Tothe and his staff devised several different revenue plans and have had to shift as circumstances change. Originally planning for an event with spectators, the PGA later announced there would be no fans.

"That was like a big pressure release valve," he said. "Once it was decided there were no fans, we could really focus on the safety of the players and caddies and volunteers."

Of course, the absence of fans and corporate tents eliminates major sources of revenue.

Last year, the tournament raised more than \$14 million for charity, but even with several revenue streams disappearing, Tothe is not giving up on providing for the local organizations. They are having players sign items — "being Canadian, I got Adam Hadwin to sign a hockey stick," Tothe said. Fans around the world can then go on the tournament website and buy raffle tickets to win the items.

While some players were happy to get back playing, others still had concerns and Tothe said some reached out to him directly. In the end, he said it



Michael Tothe photo

Michael Tothe will be the tournament director for the Charles Schwab Challenge in Fort Worth, Texas. It will be the first PGA tournament since the season was halted three months ago due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

is probably the strongest field in 20 years with the top five players in the world — Rory McIlroy, Jon Rahm, Brooks Koepka, Justin Thomas and Dustin Johnson — as well as Jason Day, Phil Mickelson and Rickie Fowler. There have been other unique aspects to or-

ganizing the tournament: setting up testing sites, new protocols for cars for players, even things as basic as meals for the players.

Tothe said the PGA Tour has been very helpful in setting protocols and guidelines while it has been up to him and his team to

implement them.

"It's been challenging, but it's been fun. I hope golf fans around the world tune in. The goal is get through the week with everyone healthy and safe," Tothe said. "Hopefully we're setting the bar for the next few events."

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