

Windy road brings Ayers to Nittany Lion golf team

By CRAIG YETSKO
Collegian Sports Writer

As the familiar faces of Craig Kilborn and Linda Cohn appear on ESPN's Sportscenter, Dirk Ayers relaxes on the couch in his Hamilton Hall room and rests his legs comfortably on a chair. When the golf highlights appear on the show, Ayers and his roommate and teammate, Jorge Pelaez, watch with interest.

Cool. Calm. Collective. These three words best describe Dirk Ayers.

Ayers is in his final year as a member of the Penn State men's golf team. He has become a team leader for the Lions the past two seasons. In his career at Penn State he has won the Eastern Championships the past two years and the Navy Invitational last spring. He was the last person to win this tournament two years in a row since Penn State alumni Dan O'Neill accomplished the feat in 1972 and '73.

Last summer, Ayers won the New York State Amateurs in Jamestown. He said the victory was "pretty large" due to its importance and was not too far from his home.

Ayers grew up in Falconer, N.Y., a small town about an hour south of Buffalo. He said the area is very flat, with some hills, a far cry from the mountainous terrain of Happy Valley.

For Ayers, the birth of his golf career came when he was in ninth grade.

"I was 14 or 15 years old when I hit a golf ball for the first time," he said.

His friend, Bill Erickson played a major factor in Ayers' progression as a golfer. As Erickson continued to hit the links, Ayers became interested in the sport. This interest sparked Ayers to travel to the course with his friend.

"I wanted to tag along," he said.

Although Ayers did not make the playing squad during his freshman year in high school, he made it the next and remained for the following two seasons. Erickson, a year older than Ayers, was the No. 1 player on the team, but after graduating, Ayers took over the top spot. During his three years on the squad, he played in the state tournament once and his team won the division titles every year.

"I foresee him having the ability and talents to win tournaments."

— Greg Nye

Penn State men's golf coach

The story behind the arrival of Ayers to Penn State was "really strange", as he described it. After high school, he did not attend college for two years. He didn't have any concrete plans but, as Ayers' close friends told him, "you better go."

His plans for college almost took him to Temple, where Erickson currently attends, but it did not pan out. He sent his application in to Penn State and was accepted. A big reason why Ayers decided to go to college was money.

"That is a determining factor," he quipped.

Ayers arrived on campus two days later than most of the students his first year. His first roommate, Adam Decker, was surprised when he came in.

"I didn't think you were coming here," he said.

Adding to the changes in Ayers' life was the departure of Coach Mary Kennedy-Zierke and the arrival of Greg Nye. Nye said the past three years have been a learning process for Ayers.

"It's been a trial and error type thing," the coach said.

Ayers said his short game is his greatest strength, as well as his ball-striking, and the consistency of long and short iron play complements his short game. He said hitting the ball off the tee has been the source of his problems.

"Driving accuracy is not what it should be," Ayers said.

On the greens, Ayers said his putting is not bad at times and not good on other occasions.

"You have your good days and bad days," he said.

The relationship between Ayers' and his teammates has been very strong.

"We've had a close team since I've been here," he said. Everyone on the team is easy to get along and is there to help when dealing with a slump. Ayers said his teammates can point out bad habits and little things in the golf swing.

"Little things in your golf swing make a difference," he said, adding

that you can learn a lot watching your teammates.

Junior teammate Jeff Diehl said Ayers was a big help during the time he lived with him for half a year. Also, he said Ayers is a key factor on the squad.

"He's been a real good leader for the team," Diehl said.

Being a student-athlete has its advantages and disadvantages. For Ayers, the biggest disadvantage is time. He said there is never an off-season in golf and the demands of catching up with schoolwork is a tough task.

"You can't take 12 credits one semester then 18 the next," he said.

During the season, practice is crucial for the golf team. Because the amount of tournaments the team plays in, is relatively small, practice time becomes important. He said the team practices four days a week and on weekends. On the weekends, the team plays 18 holes a day. He reiterated that time is full during the season.

"Not too many people know how much time we practice," Ayers said.

Ayers said he has several golf courses on which he likes to play.

"I love to play at Kingsmill, the site of the William and Mary Invitational," he said, adding it also hosts the Anheuser-Busch Classic, a stop on the PGA tour.

Ayers said he is looking forward to playing on the Hogsneck Course, the site of the Eastern Championships. Also, he said he likes to play at the Colorado Springs, Michigan, and Navy courses.

Nye said he would like to see Ayers have an enjoyable senior year, adding that he has the skills to excel at any competition.

"I foresee him having the abilities and talents to win tournaments," he said.

Ayers' future dream is to be a professional, either a club pro or a member of the PGA tour. He said that somewhere down the road, "I'd say I tried."

"If I don't make it, I don't make it," he said. "If I do, that's great."

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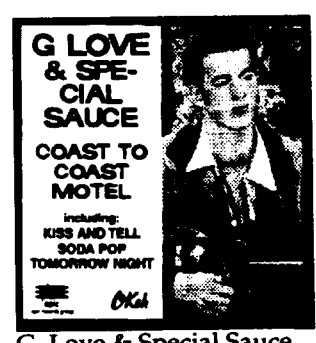
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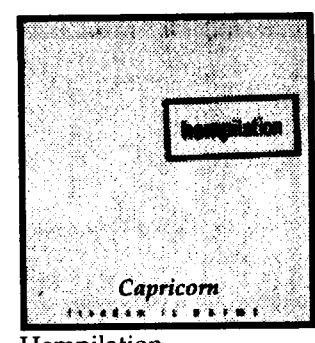
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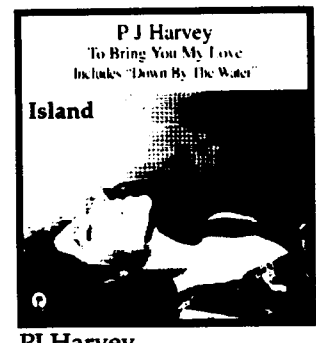
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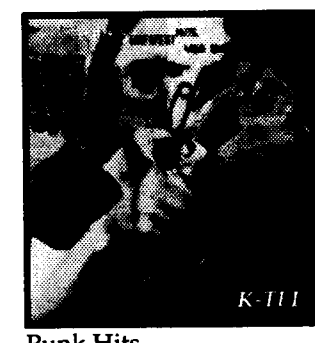
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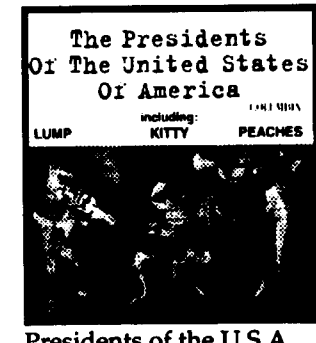
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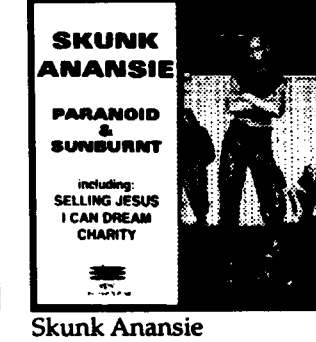


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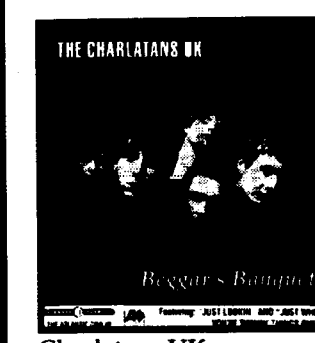
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