**Crosby Has Hope**

**Nathaniel Crosby wants to serve his players and country well when he returns to Royal Liverpool in 2019 to Captain the USA’s Walker Cup team. Mark Gorton spoke to him.**

Back in 1983 Nathaniel Crosby was a fine 21 year old golfer who, the previous year, had achieved low amateur honours at the US Open Championship at Pebble Beach. The year before that he had won the 1981 US Amateur Championship at San Francisco’s Olympic Club.

He also happened to be the son of entertainment legend, Bing Crosby, a passionate low handicapper once described as “a golfer who liked to sing”. Sadly Nathaniel’s triumphs were not witnessed by his father - he had died of a heart attack in October 1977 just after playing 18 holes on a course near Madrid, the setting for some of sport’s most famous last words: “That was a great game of golf, fellas.”

Bing Crosby’s love for golf was great and almost matched by his ability, so it was inevitable that Nathaniel would be introduced to the game at an early age, though the source of his early lessons comes as a surprise.

“We had a hand picked nanny named Bridget Brennan who was an Irish golf pro from Nenagh in County Tipperary. She started working for us the year I was born and taught me the grip and how to putt on the carpet when I was about three, and then I was hitting shots in the backyard which was generous in size. Sadly she died when I was 11 but she really gave me my start. I eventually named my daughter after her who is now 24 years old.

“Dad took me for lessons when I was about 7 with my life long friend and teacher Maurice Ver Brugge. He was an accomplished player and served as the golf pro at the Burlingame Country Club for 49 years. Eventually I made it to the course to play with my dad at the age of 8 or 9 and from there we played about 100 rounds a year together with my brother.

“Dad was very reserved about offering us instructional advice but would say things like, ‘I’m not a PGA pro but I’ve noticed that even though all of the best players swing very different they all stay low through their shots.’”

Bing Crosby’s occupation and passion for golf also meant that Nathaniel was able to get plenty of experience of British conditions while a youngster. “I’d been able to play in Britain because in the last three years of his life Dad would go over to play shows at places like the London Palladium and take us with him. We’d also get across to Ireland and Scotland and play the likes of Turnberry, Gleneagles and St Andrews, and I competed in the British Boys at Sunningdale aged 14.”

When 1983 arrived Nathaniel was riding that wave of success. In 82 he had also won the prestigious Porter Cup and helped the USA win that year’s Amateur Team Championship in Switzerland. Selection for the Walker Cup team was more or less inevitable.

The talented lineup also included future PGA Tour stars like Brad Faxon, Willie Wood and Rick Fehr, as well as Amateur veterans like Playing Captain Jay Sigel, about to win his second consecutive US Amateur, and perennial Walker Cup players, Jim Holtgrieve and Bob Lewis. As the ranking number 3 amateur at the time, Nathaniel had high hopes, but his first day turned out to be “pretty tough”.

“I was matched against Philip Parkin,” he recalls, “and he lit me up shooting 4 or 5 under par and thumping me 6 & 4. Jay Sigel benched me for the alternate shot matches, and then from the singles the following day. I was kind of knocked back. To be fair, though, Jay had every right to bench me as I wasn’t in my best form.

“The next day I was paired with the recent Mid Amateur Champion, Bill Hoffer, against the mighty George Macgregor and future Ryder Cup star, Philip Walton. Seemingly it was Jay Sigel’s strategy to pitch his weakest team - me and Bill - against their best. That morning Bill and I really played our best golf, including a one iron that I hit to a foot on the long par three 11th. We came to the last hole one up and Bill popped his drive only 200 yards leaving me with a full five iron into the green which I hit to 7 feet. Bill was noticeably nervous but we only needed two putts to win. He promptly hit his putt 5 feet by and thank goodness I managed to hole it to salvage the win.

“I still watched the afternoon matches from outside the ropes but relished the US victory and the fact I was able to represent a winning US team in international matches for the second time.”

Does Nathaniel have any other specific memories of Hoylake? “I remember the out of bounds on the 1st for sure. You had some serious jitters on that one.”

In 2017, at Los Angeles Country Club, USA chalked up an impressive 19-7 victory, but Nathaniel places no stock in it, not least because in 2015, at Royal Lytham, GB&I ran out winners 16½ to 9½.

“Links golf is a different kind of challenge. The USA boys now are ‘hit it high’. Their athleticism and the equipment means they can launch the ball high even into the wind, whereas you have to remember that back in the old days we played differently. We were used to playing off the right foot to keep the ball low when we had to. So all of us, whether the best college players or career amateurs, some of whom had played in Open championships, were kind of well enough prepared for links golf.

“In American golf you don’t get many unhelpful hops and bounces. Links golf is all about position and imagination. To prepare, right now I’m thinking I may take the team to a links course like Bandon Dunes on the Oregon coast. When we’re in the UK we might play Royal Birkdale and Royal Lytham, get them used to the time difference and the type of golf they’ll be playing. I have to get counsel from the USGA but that would be my idea.

“The Walker Cup means so much to the kids aiming to be golf pros. If their futures go as planned they could last 20 years or more. If you’re lucky enough to play in the Walker Cup it will be a memory you’ll have your whole life - an incredible carved out memory. I retired from competitive golf aged 26 and went into the equipment business. I was comfortable with that, but for these young kids, for some of them it’s an enormous rite of passage.”

Nowadays Nathaniel plays much of his golf at Seminole Golf Club at Juno Beach, Florida. It’s one of America’s most exclusive Clubs and reminded me, in the Crosby context, of Bob Hope’s joke about Cypress Point in California: “One year they had a big membership drive at Cypress. They drove out 40 members.”

In 2021 Seminole will open its doors to the public for the first time as the venue for the next Walker Cup on US soil and, although there are other contenders, it seems likely that Nathaniel Crosby’s appointment will be for the standard two match term, meaning he will Captain on another course with which he has an important bond. For now he’s focussing only on Hoylake.

“When I was asked to captain the side I was honoured and surprised. It was truly a thrill. I thought maybe they’d go for a younger guy. It’s a wonderful opportunity for me to be part of the Walker Cup story again, come back to Royal Liverpool and trigger some old, happy memories. I hope I serve the USGA, the team and my country well.”