**Perry will 'play by the heart' to set schedule after success**

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At first blush, Kenny Perry was taken aback when he opened Monday’s USA Today and found no coverage of the U.S. Senior Open.

The PGA Tour’s John Deere Classic was in there. So was Phil Mickelson’s playoff victory in the Scottish Open.

But the Franklin resident couldn’t find his own five-stroke, comeback victory in the senior major in Omaha, Neb. It got to Perry at first, he said, but then it put things in perspective.

“You can win a great event – that was a little disappointing, but it shows in this stage of my career, it was a big thing, but it’s still not that big,” Perry said Tuesday in a phone interview. “It’ll be family first the rest of the way.”

Perry, 52, is content to keep the same laid-back approach to golf and life that he adopted in recent years while transitioning from the PGA Tour to the senior Champions Tour after age 50.

It’s taken some restraint to keep that mindset, however, as his golf game has surged.

In a three-week span, Perry has won the U.S. Senior Open and the Senior Players Championship – the first two majors of his career.

On Sunday, he roared back from a 10-stroke deficit Friday to win the U.S. Senior Open with a final-round 63 at the Omaha Country Club.

“I’ve been a pro since 1982, and I’ve won and had a little success, but it seemed like all the big things always eluded me,” Perry said. “And then finally, the door opens. Here I am, about to turn 53 next month, and things start finally coming my way.”

Perry says his career’s had its fair share of “disappointment” and “heartache.”

There are his infamous near-misses at major events – the 1996 PGA Championship, 2009 Masters and May’s Senior PGA Championship – and he battled through surgery in February that didn’t immediately improve his left knee after he was cleared to play.

The surgery was performed by Nashville Predators team doctor Michael Pagnani on Feb. 18 to repair two tears in his meniscus and help relieve some pain from arthritis. He returned to practice at the end of March, but he was still struggling to walk, even while tying for second in May at the Senior PGA.

Just before the Regions Tradition – another of the five senior majors – in June, Pagnani gave Perry a cortisone shot in his knee, as well as anti-inflammatory medicine to reduce swelling.
The relief from that shot about six weeks ago and a tidal wave of momentum have Perry feeling as good as ever – physically and mentally.

“I had to walk 72 holes each week, and my leg did great,” he said. “That gave me a lot of confidence going into Omaha, knowing my knee was doing better. Most of the time, golf is like a roller-coaster ride, and you’re down in the bottom. You’re trying to climb that hill, and finally I got over that hump.”

Perry credits his return to sound ball-striking and some renewed life in his putter for the improved results on the course. He leads the Champions Tour in putting average and is third in scoring average. He’s won $1,499,550 in 11 events with seven top-10 finishes.

“I finally started driving the ball well, and I started putting better,” he said. “When my putter woke up a little bit – that’s been the story of my career. I’ve always hit the ball OK, but whenever my putter decides to wake up, I get very competitive in tournaments.”

In the U.S. Senior Open, Perry led the field in driving distance (300.5-yard average) and tied for fewest putts at 113. His 64-63 finish set a tournament record for the final two rounds, and his 63 was the best final round in the tournament’s history.

He finished 13 under, which tied the tourney record set by Hale Irwin in 2000. Perry is the ninth player to win consecutive senior majors.

“I thought I played the greatest round I’ve ever played on Sunday there in Omaha,” he said. “I guess the moral of the story is persistence pays off. It’s been a long struggle and a lot of heartaches, but here in the last month, I’ve had a lot of relief.

“These are things I’ll tell my grandkids. We’ll have all this on film and tape. It’s just been remarkable.”

Perry isn’t sure what the immediate future holds. He leads the Champions Tour’s point standings for the Charles Schwab Cup with 2,508 points and a nearly 1,100-point lead over second-place David Frost.

But he’s also eligible on the PGA Tour for three more years, and he said with the way the last few weeks have gone, he’s not sure if his immediate schedule will have him on the PGA Tour or the Champions Tour.

To figure that out, Perry said he’ll “play by the heart.”

“People ask me what my schedule is, and I really can’t tell them,” he said. “I’ll see how my leg feels and how I’m feeling physically. I’m doing a lot of crossovers. I’ll play some PGA events and then some Champions events. I’m not really sure which way I’m going here the next few weeks.”

No matter which way he goes, he’ll have local support as he does it. The former Western Kentucky University golfer had 50 well-wishers waiting for him at the airport when he arrived in Kentucky on Monday night, he said.

Things are starting to go faster again for Perry, but he says he has his priorities in check as he rides along.

“If for some reason I get out there and get hot on the PGA Tour, things may change. I may focus a little more and play hard again,” he said. “But I really don’t see it. I’m going to enjoy these last years. I figure I’ve got five

years of good golf left in me, so I’m not going to push it. We’re going to enjoy the ride and look forward to the future.”