Athlete, businessman, storyteller

Ex-QB ready for 'good time' at benefit

By Mike McClendon
Staff Writer

Zeke Martin won't get to play in the charity golf tournament that bears his name, but that won't diminish his enthusiasm about being there.

The Zeke Martin UNT Ex-Letterman Golf Classic, which is expected to raise more than $10,000 for the University of North Texas athletic department, will be on June 7 at Robson Ranch. But Mr. Martin, a three-time all-conference quarterback at UNT and former mayor of Denton, will be forced to keep his clubs in his golf bag after a recent series of injuries and illnesses.

"I'm going to have to sit this one out," said Mr. Martin, 78, who was playing golf in New Mexico when he fell and broke his shoulder a few months ago.

The broken shoulder was the beginning of a string of health problems that have hampered Mr. Martin recently. He also experienced a dangerous situation with his diabetes, a urinary tract infection and two more falls, which resulted in a total of five broken ribs.

"Once I got out of the hospital this last time, I decided I wasn't going to do some of the things I used to," Mr. Martin said. "I don't want to fall again. But I'm still going to be [at the golf tournament] having a good time. I'm going to get to ride around in a golf cart and talk with my friends about the old days, about how good we used to be or about how bad we used to be."

Despite all his other successes, talking to people might be what Mr. Martin does best.

"When Zeke talks, people like to listen," said Jim Brewer, who played football with Mr. Martin at UNT. "He's a great storyteller."

He was also a great quarterback. Mr. Martin, a member of the North Texas

See MARTIN on 21A

Sitting in his office at Martin-Eagle Oil Co., Zeke Martin holds a putter that will be a prize in the Zeke Martin UNT Ex-Letterman Golf Classic on June 7. The tournament, named for the three-time all-conference quarterback, raises funds for UNT's athletic department.
Sports Hall of Fame, led the Eagles to a bowl game in 1948 and played professionally for one season in the Canadian Football League.

"Zeke was cool under pressure and he was a good passer," said Mr. Brewer. "Back then, the quarterback called his own plays in the huddle and Zeke was excellent at that."

After his playing days were over, Mr. Martin picked up a clipboard and was the head football coach at Denton High School, his alma mater, for eight years.

"We won and lost about 50-50," Mr. Martin said of his coaching career at Denton.

Mr. Martin turned out to be a better businessman than football coach. During his final year of coaching, Mr. Martin, the son of a carpenter, pulled off one of the most successful conversations of his life. He talked a local banker into giving him a loan to build a service station on the corner of Highland and Avenue C, the lot where his childhood home once sat. Thus, Martin-Eagle Oil Co. was born.

"I thought calling it an oil company was a little too much," Mr. Martin said. "I only had one service station."

Not for long. Today, Martin-Eagle Oil Co. is a multi-million dollar business, which owns about 40 service stations. Soon after the first service station went into business, Mr. Martin opened a hamburger restaurant, Zeke's Drive-In.

"The dorms didn't cook on Sunday nights then and that place would be hopping," said Mr. Martin, who later sold the restaurant property to UNT. "We used to have Mean Joe Greene and Abner Haynes come in all the time. We couldn't cook fast enough."

With his success as an entrepreneur, Mr. Martin had the opportunity to give back to the college where he earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees.

"I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for North Texas," Mr. Martin said. "Everybody likes to give back to the things that helped them along. If they hadn't given me a scholarship, I wouldn't have even gone to college."

Mr. Martin, who also lettered in tennis and basketball during college, has been especially supportive of the UNT athletics program.

"Zeke has done more for that school's athletics program than anyone else," said Mr. Brewer. "He's a successful businessman and he's helped North Texas financially. When North Texas needs something, they go to Zeke and he says, 'Yeah, let's do it.'"

"Without question, Zeke is one of the top alums we have," said UNT senior associate athletic director Hank Dickenson. "The people who were around this institution in the '40s and '50s really rally around him and always have. But not only has Zeke been supportive as an alum, but also as a businessman. Zeke and his sons [who now run Martin-Eagle Oil Co.] have been very good corporate supporters of the athletic department."

The city of Denton has also benefited from Mr. Martin's support. Spurred on by citizens who valued his name recognition and liked what he stood for, Mr. Martin decided to enter the Denton political arena in the 1960s — serving as mayor for two years late in the decade.

During his political career, Mr. Martin helped implement the Southeast Denton Paving Project, which fixed neglected streets in the area. Mr. Martin also helped secure Denton a new city hall that is still in use today.

"Zeke was a very efficient and outgoing mayor," said L.A. Nelson, a Denton attorney who served on the City Council with Martin. "We often differed in the way we voted on the council, but he was good for Denton then and he's good for Denton now. He hasn't changed a bit."

These days, despite his recent injuries and illnesses, Mr. Martin still serves on the oil company's board of directors, but is enjoying a semi-retired lifestyle. He still shows up to the office every day, but just to answer his mail, visit with his sons and offer the occasional bit of advice.

He still lives in Denton with Bettye, his college sweetheart and wife of 54 years. The couple tries to make it out to the racetrack as often as possible, too. Mr. Martin is part-owner of a racehorse named Three Refs Girl, which is competing at Lone Star Park this season. Mr. Martin and the two other owners met while officiating Southwest Conference football games several years ago.

Currently, Mr. Martin is concentrating on letting his body heal and looking forward to seeing his old friends at the upcoming golf tournament.

"I wish I could play," Mr. Martin said. "I'm feeling better, though. Who knows? Maybe I can talk someone into letting me be their designated putter."

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