THE RECORDER

INSIDER'S Tournament Guide

MARCH 7, 2024

HOW SCOTTIE SCHEFFLER WON THE PLAYERS

THE PLAYERS®

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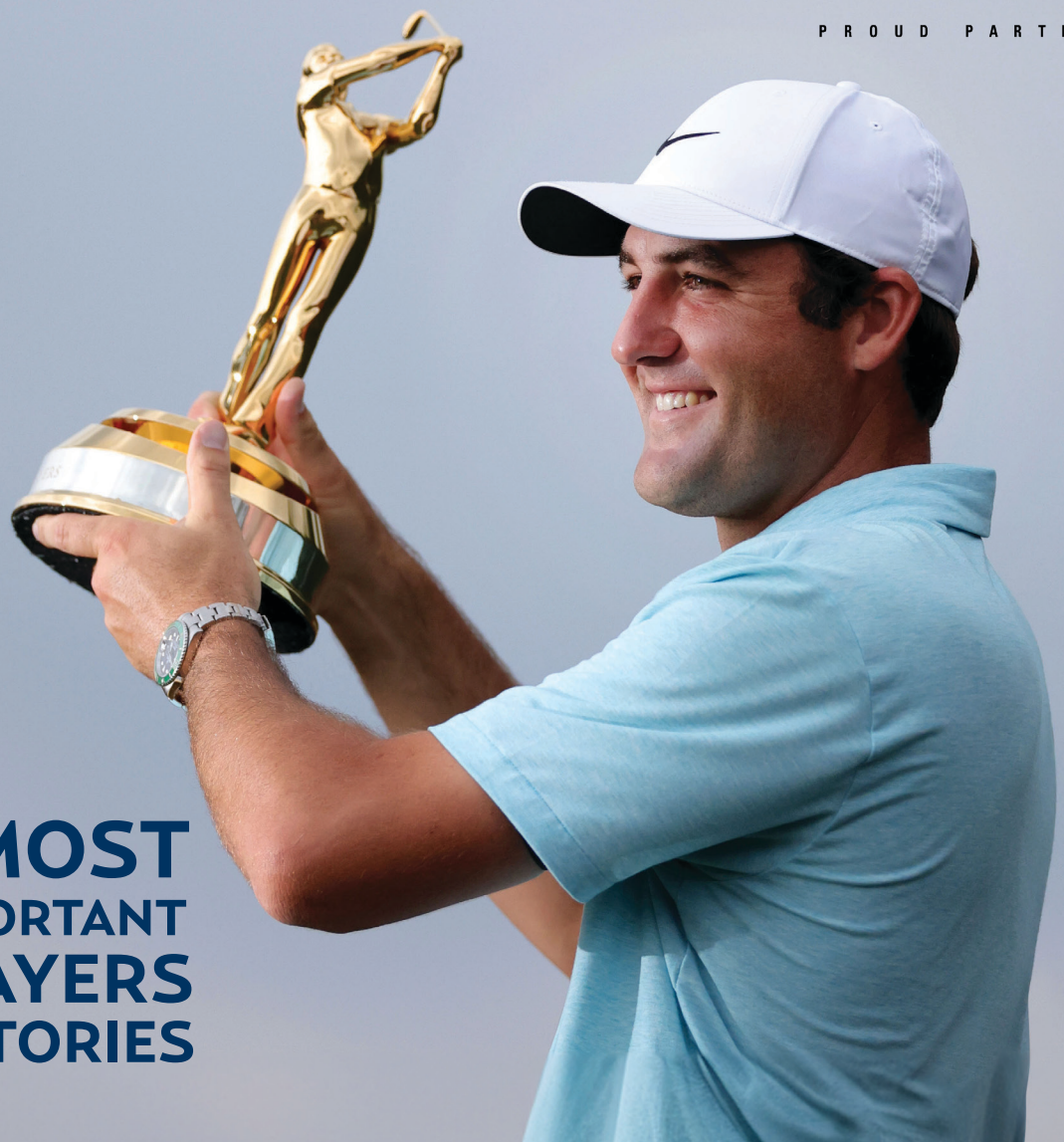

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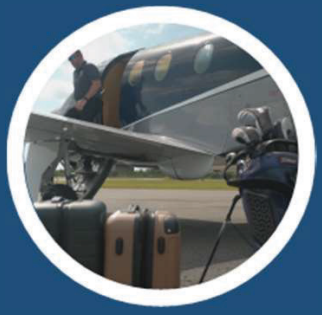

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WHAT'S INSIDE

8 WELCOME TO THE PLAYERS

8 BY THE NUMBERS

10 NAVIGATING THE PLAYERS

26 LOOKING BACK HOW SCOTTIE SCHEFFLER WON THE PLAYERS

36 *MOST EXCITING PLAYERS* 2013: TIGER WOODS & SERGIO GARCIA

42 THE 5 MOST IMPORTANT PLAYERS CHAMPIONSHIPS

52 NEW PLAYERS TO WATCH

58 *MOST EXCITING PLAYERS* 1996: FRED COUPLES

59 AI - ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE - IS ALREADY IN GOLF

62 *MOST EXCITING PLAYERS* 2015: RICKIE FOWLER

66 *MOST EXCITING PLAYERS* 1999: DAVID DUVAL

68 *MOST EXCITING PLAYERS* 2000: HAL SUTTON

72 WHO OR WHAT CAN PREDICT PLAYERS WINNER?

Cover photo provided by the PGA Tour.

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THE RECORDER
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Eccella Smiles is happy to introduce Dr. Shelby Sox to the practice. She is a Jacksonville Beach native who graduated from Fletcher High School and then continued her education at the University of Florida. After completing her undergraduate studies, she earned her Doctorate in Dental Medicine at the University of Florida College of Dentistry, as well. Go Gators!

When Dr. Sox isn't wearing her white coat, you can find her on the beach with her husband and two dogs. She also enjoys eating at her favorite restaurant, TacoLu, and spending time with her friends and family. She is super excited to give back to the community that raised her.

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Welcome to THE PLAYERS

PHOTO BY ANTHONY RENDA PGATOURENTERTAINMENT/PGA TOUR

PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE PGA TOUR

LEE SMITH

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of THE PLAYERS Championship, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the entire Ponte Vedra community for its unwavering support of our tournament and its charitable mission. Your commitment to our cause is truly inspiring, and it motivates us to continue improving this championship for the benefit of our friends and neighbors in this great town.

While a lot has changed over the past 50 years, our goal from day one has been to put forth an experience that is thrilling, inspiring, and relentlessly entertaining for our fans. I am confident that we have succeeded in delivering just that for THE PLAYERS 2024. We look forward to the return of fan favorite spots at TPC Sawgrass, as well as the addition of new venues and options to satisfy devout golf fans and those seeking to take in the day outside the ropes alike.

This remarkable tournament, and its catalyzing impact on the community, are a direct reflection of the steadfast support of this community. We look forward to joining you at TPC Sawgrass in March to celebrate the 50th anniversary, enjoy incredible golf, and most importantly, acknowledge the pivotal role that our fans play in making it all possible.

We'll see you on the Island Green!

Lee Smith

Executive Director, THE PLAYERS

BY THE NUMBERS

Course

- **$1** — Amount that former PGA TOUR Commissioner Deane Beman paid to purchase the 415 acres of swampland where TPC Sawgrass now sits
- **15** — minutes it takes to cut a hole location and replace the old hold location
- **84** — number of bunkers on THE PLAYERS Stadium Course — 52 on the front nine and 32 on the back. No. 17 is the only hole on the course that has one bunker.
- **2.5** — rough height, in inches
- **137** — distance, in yards, of the Island Green 17th Hole

Agronomy

- **105** — full-time agronomy employees who oversee the maintenance of both the Stadium Course and its sister course, Dye's Valley.
- **12,000** — approximate number of man hours worked by the agronomy staff during tournament week alone

Overseed Process:

- **4** — kinds of seed spread throughout the entire Stadium Course, including the practice grounds: Rye/Fine Fescue on the fairways and rough; Velvet Bent/Poa Trivialis on the greens.
- **25** — tons of seeds spread
- **125** — acres of land the overseed covers

Equipment the agronomy team uses:

- **15** — John Deere 2500 Triplex mower used for fairways
- **18** — John Deere 180SL mowers used for greens
- **16** — John Deere 260SL mowers used for tees and approaches
- **6** — John Deere 2653 mowers used for intermediate cut
- **66** — John Deere Turf Gators
- **6** — TruTurf greensrollers
- **40** — 20-inch Honda Rotary Mowers used for the rough
- **60** — Blowers to clean

Competition

- **51.22%** — percentage of players who find the fairway off the tee on the par-5 2nd hole (since ShotLink began in 2003); this is the toughest Fairway to hit at TPC Sawgrass
- **7,189** — tournament yardage
- **15** — international players who have won THE PLAYERS
- **6** — number of players that have won THE PLAYERS at least twice (Jack Nicklaus, Steve Elkington, Hal Sutton, Fred Couples, Davis Love III and Tiger Woods)
- **0** — number of back-to-back winners of THE PLAYERS
- **15** — number of international winners of THE PLAYERS, from 11 different countries (Australia, Canada, Germany, Scotland, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Zimbabwe)
- **7** — widest victory margin. Steve Elkington won by 7 strokes over Scott Hoch in 1997.
- **6** — largest come-from-behind victory. Raymond Floyd, 1981, Sawgrass Country Club. At TPC Sawgrass, the largest come-from-behind victory is 5 strokes (Justin Leonard/1998 and Henrik Stenson/2009)
- **100 feet, 1 inch** — length of the longest putt made at THE PLAYERS (Ben Curtis/R1/2007/14th hole)

17th Hole

- **64** — number of balls that found the water on the 17th hole at the 2022 tournament
- **868** — balls in the water on No. 17 since 2003
- **4 feet, 8 inches** — length of Rickie Fowler's winning putt on the 17th hole in 2015.
- **69 feet, 7 inches** — distance of Jhonattan Vegas' birdie putt on the 17th hole, marking the longest putt ever made on the 17th hole
- **78 feet** — length of the Island Green
- **50,000 to 60,000** — the number of golf balls that are retrieved from the surrounding water every year.
- **137** — length of the hole from the tournament tees
- **60 feet** — distance of Tiger Woods' "better than most" birdie putt in 2001
- **Nine** — number of holes-in-one on the 17th
- **55 square feet** — size of the bunker at the front of the green
- **3,912** — square footage of the green (compared to a course average of 4,500)
- **12** — the highest score posted by a professional golfer; Bob Tway in 2005.

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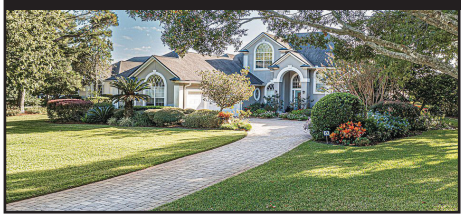

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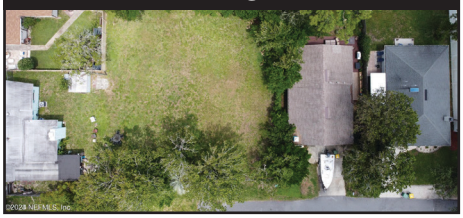
2 BUILDABLE LOTS @ 13TH STREET N



0 13th St. N. – Jacksonville Beach
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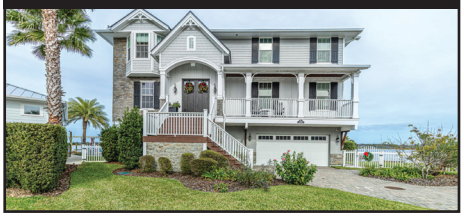
UNDER CONTRACT



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Navigating THE PLAYERS

PHOTO BY CRAIG O'NEAL

TICKETS

Tickets are mobile-only and day-specific tickets: They can be purchased exclusively online at THEPLAYERS.com.

Parking is purchased separately at THEPLAYERS.COM/parking. Parking passes are completely digital and cannot be purchased on-site.

Will Call: Located in the parking lot of Tournament Plaza, near Larry's Giant Subs. Will call address is 830 State Road A1A North, Ponte Vedra Beach

Youth Tickets: Up to two youth, ages 15 and under, will be admitted free with a ticketed adult all week. All youth age 6 and older must have a ticket in order to access hospitality venues.

Need more information? Go to theplayers.com/tickets/faq.

PHOTO BY CRAIG O'NEAL

PARKING

General Parking Lot address: 5360 Palm Valley Road, Ponte Vedra Beach

- Parking passes are required on all tournament days, Tuesday-Sunday.
- All parking passes are daily passes and must be purchased in advance via THEPLAYERS.com/parking.
- "Four or more for free" parking vouchers are not available in 2024.
- Tuesday and Wednesday parking costs $15 per day and Thursday-Sunday costs $40 per day.

Rideshare presented by TruGreen:
Rideshares will drop off and pick up at the Couples Entry off ATP Boulevard, which is just steps from the 15th hole. Rideshare vehicles will be staged outside the Couples Entry, making this one of the easiest modes of transportation for spectators.

Getting to THE PLAYERS Championship:

- Enter Destination: THE PLAYERS Championship
- Enter the tournament through the Couples Entry

Leaving THE PLAYERS Championship:

- Exit tournament grounds through the Couples Entry
- Follow the tournament signage to the designated rideshare pick-up area outside the Couples Entry
- Get in available rideshare and head to your preferred destination

Bike Parking:
THE PLAYERS offers complimentary bike parking in lot 4W. Lot 4W is situated just past Gate B and fans should enter TPC Sawgrass from the entrance off PGA TOUR Boulevard. Bike parking is not available in the general parking lot. Bike racks are available free of charge and fans are reminded to bring their own lock to secure their bicycles.

Golf Cart Parking:
THE PLAYERS offers complimentary golf cart parking in lot 4W. Lot 4W is situated just past Gate B and fans should enter TPC Sawgrass from the entrance off PGA TOUR Boulevard. Golf cart parking is not available in the general parking lot.

Disabled Guest Services:
THE PLAYERS Disabled Guest Services program provides shuttles during the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12 ■

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PARKING

championship. Fans who have handicap parking access are still required to purchase a parking pass in advance for THE PLAYERS general parking lot off County Road 210.

Fans with a handicap parking hang tag, as well as a PLAYERS parking pass, will be directed to park in a specific part of the general parking lot. From there, golf carts will take them to one of the designated Disabled Guest Services locations on the golf course.

Carts will run from the time gates open until 30 minutes after play ends and will only pick up and drop off from the below designated locations. They will not stray from official route under any circumstances.

- Behind 16 green by Couples Gate and The Bier Garden
- Behind 17 tee adjacent to the Welcome Experience and the Food Court
- Players left of 9 fairway by Wine & Dine on 9.
- Players left of 9 green by Past Chairman Hospitality.
- Clubhouse area behind 3 tee
- Players right of 16 tee
- Players right of 15 fairway at Taste of JAX

If disabled guests need assistance from a location without shuttle access, they should contact any tournament official who carries a radio.

Shuttles

On Friday (March 15), Saturday (March 16) and Sunday (March, 17), THE PLAYERS will run a free shuttle service for Nocatee and area residents to park for free at Palm Valley Academy (700 Bobcat Lane, Ponte Vedra Beach), Valley Ridge Academy (105 Greenleaf Drive, Ponte Vedra Beach) and Pine Island Academy (805 Pine Island Road, St. Augustine) and then take a free shuttle to and from THE PLAYERS.

The shuttles will run from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. and will drop fans off right in front of the Nicklaus entrance. Note that the Valley Ridge Academy shuttle is not available on Sunday. Shuttles are available on a first-come first-serve basis.

Shuttles are available from several downtown Jacksonville hotels to THE PLAYERS, Thursday through Sunday of tournament week. Shuttles will be available from Hogan Street by the Marriott Jacksonville Downtown, Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront and Southbank Hotel Jacksonville Riverwalk (which guests at the Doubletree by Hilton Jacksonville Riverfront can also utilize) to both hotel guests and area residents, providing a convenient and cost-effective way for fans to get to and from the tournament.

Shuttle passes are $20 plus applicable fees.

POLICIES

Cashless experience: Payment processes at the PGA TOUR Fan Shop, all vendors and all concession stands will be digital, contactless and cashless throughout the entire tournament property.

Spectator Information Tents are located at:

- Davis Love III entry
- Taste of Jax (11 green/12 tee)
- PGA TOUR Fan Shop at THE PLAYERS Welcome Experience
- Wine & Dine on 9 presented by Meiomi Wines

Help keep THE PLAYERS clean and safe

Fans can text THE PLAYERS from anywhere on the course to notify a staff member of an on-site issue. Text 69050 to reach a staff member while at the tournament.

Fan Code of Conduct

Spectators will be subject to expulsion and the loss of ticket privileges for the following breaches of etiquette:

- Making rude, vulgar or other inappropriate comments or gestures;
- Verbal or physical harassment of players, volunteers, officials or spectators;
- Distracting a player or any disruption of play;
- Behavior that is unruly, disruptive, unsafe or illegal in nature;
- Failing to follow the instruction of a championship official, volunteer or security personnel.

Fans can text THE PLAYERS from anywhere on course to notify a staff member of an on-site issue. Text 69050 to reach a staff member while at the tournament.

Mobile Device Policy

- Spectator Mobile Device Policy for PGA TOUR Tournaments (please see your ticket for complete terms):
- Devices must be on silent at all times; flash may not be used.
- Devices may be used to capture video, audio and photos (content) in all areas throughout tournament week.
- Content may be used for personal purposes (e.g., personal social media); no commercial use.
- No live streaming or real-time coverage (e.g., no shot-by-shot coverage).
- Data use (e.g., texting) is permitted in all areas throughout tournament week.
- Phone calls are allowed only in designated areas.
- Please be respectful of play and do not interfere with players, caddies or media.
- All posted signage and instructions from tournament staff must be observed.
- Failure to comply with this policy may result in the revocation of your ticket.

Autograph Policy

- On-course autograph seeking is prohibited (this includes, but is not limited to, tees, fairways, greens and practice areas during practice rounds and tournament rounds).
- Autograph seeking will be restricted to designated autograph zones: practice grounds and scoring area
- No memorabilia can be brought into the tournament including pin flags, photos, trading cards, balls and other sports paraphernalia.

Food Policy

THE PLAYERS allows fans to bring in their own food in a one-gallon clear, plastic bag where food items are also wrapped in clear wrap. Fans can refill their empty water bottles at the filtered water stations. THE PLAYERS will allow reusable plastic or metal cups up to 32 oz. at entries, as long as they are empty.

Alcohol Policy

- Strict adherence to alcoholic beverage consumption laws will be enforced on the course and in all hospitality areas
- Alcohol will not be served to anyone younger than 21; proof of age will be required for anyone younger than 35
- Only two drinks may be purchased at a time; spectators are not allowed to carry more than two drinks at any given time

Bags + Permitted/Prohibited Items

Opaque bags measuring 6-by-6-by-6 inches and smaller or clear bags 12-by-6-by-12 inches and smaller are allowed inside the course grounds.

THE PLAYERS allows fans to bring in their own food in a one-gallon clear, plastic

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14 ■

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POLICIES

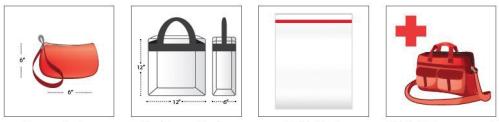
bag where food items are also wrapped in clear wrap.

THE PLAYERS will allow reusable plastic or metal cups up to 32 oz. at entries, as long as they are empty.

Free Fan Lockers courtesy of Atlantic Self Storage

Located at the Nicklaus and Couples entry, THE PLAYERS is offering free fan lockers so that fans can conveniently and safely store belongings. (Reminder: THE PLAYERS does adhere to a strict clear bag policy.)

APPROVED BAGS



Infant and Medical supplies will be permitted after proper inspection.

WHAT'S NEW IN 2024

• **THE PLAYERS' 50th Anniversary:** This year, THE PLAYERS will celebrate its 50th nnniversary and will have special merchandise and activations to celebrate the milestone with the community.

• **The Intracoastal Club:** The Intracoastal Club will provide fans with an exciting new destination to relax and refuel while enjoying the tournament. This venue offers the perfect blend of sophistication and sport with abundant TVs, bar-style seating and the ability to purchase upscale food and beverages, including beer, wine and signature cocktails. Situated between Holes 12 and 13, this open-air venue provides incredible views of two of the most thrilling holes on the course.

• **Renovations on Hole 18:** It's a subtle change, but one that is designed to bolster the already raucous atmosphere of the finishing stretch at TPC Sawgrass. A simple reshaping of the mounding on Hole 18 has opened up the sight lines to allow PLAYERS' future spectators to see every shot.

• **Top Dawg Tavern:** There's a new top dawg in town — or THE PLAYERS food court. Top Dawg, located in Bartram Park, will bring your gameday favorites to TPC Sawgrass.

• **New Executive Director:** Lee Smith has taken the helm as executive director for the 2024 tournament. Smith brings with him a wealth of industry experience, having spent more than 20 years with the PGA TOUR and as a PGA of America instructor.

FOOD & DRINK

• **Taste of JAX** — 11 green/12 tee

• **Cousins Maine Lobster** — serving up its 100% premium, wild-caught, sustainably harvested lobster from Maine.

• **Mojo BBQ** — a premier barbecue, Southern food and craft cocktail destination with eight locations in North and Central Florida.

• **ABBQ** — Serving up Texas-style BBQ at the Beach.

• **Silkie's Chicken & Champagne Bar** — Historic Springfield upscale casual restaurant featuring Chef Kenny Gilbert's Signature Fried Chicken, Biscuits & Champagne Cocktails.

• **Taste of Jax Bar** — featuring Bushmill's Irish Whiskey

Wine & Dine on 9 presented by Meiomi Wines — 9 fairway

Enjoy food from Bonefish Grill and a glass of wine from Meiomi Wines, the official wine of the PGA TOUR, in a beautiful garden setting. Enjoy the brand-new putting green, and if you need to freshen up, take advantage of the permanent restrooms.

Food Court – THE PLAYERS Welcome Experience

• **Homespun Kitchen** — Healthy fast food. Whether you are vegan, gluten free or paleo, you will find tons of options at Homespun.

• **Firehouse Subs** — This sandwich shop was founded in Jacksonville and specializes in hot subs and sandwiches made with premium meats and cheeses, steamed to perfection, and then piled high on a toasted roll.

• **Bono's Pit Bar-B-Q** — Lou Bono opened the first Bono's on Beach Boulevard in 1949. The restaurant prides itself on serving up an authentic Southern Pit barbecue experience you won't forget.

• **The Local** — Jacksonville based high quality café focusing on delicious food with unique twists on every dish as well as craft booze and coffee.

• **Top Dawg Tavern** — Be sure to stop by to fuel up classic American food from this family-owned restaurant.

• **Tropical Smoothie** — Bold, flavorful smoothies, wraps, sandwiches, flatbreads and salads with high-quality ingredients and fresh produce.

• **Daily's concessions**

Tacos on 12 – 12 green

One of the most well-trafficked food venues

on the course, featuring food and drink from TacoLu, Jacksonville's most popular Baja Mexicana.

Sawgrass Square – 10 tee

Located at the Davis Love III Entry. Grab a donut from Mini Bar and/or some BBQ from 4 Rivers Smokehouse.

• **Mini Bar** — Jacksonville's first mini-doughnut shop will be serving up a set menu of mini-sized doughnuts in more than a dozen unique flavors. Some examples include fruity pebbles, samoa, pop tart, maple bacon and coffee cake.

• **4 Rivers Smokehouse** — a sophisticated Texas-style smokehouse

Trucks on 10

This venue offers flavors from local, favorite food trucks and an open-air Michelob ULTRA Mobile bar.

• Twisted Okie BBQ
• Mama's
• Chinchillas Burgers
• Saffron Mediterranean Kitchen
• Tikiz
• What's the Catch

The Patio — between 10 tee and 18 green/16 tee

The Patio offers a shaded fan zone that includes open-air seating and a videoboard to keep up with the tournament action. The Patio features a Michelob ULTRA bar as well as food from V Pizza, founded by Jacksonville natives with the goal of bringing true Neapolitan pizza to their hometown.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16 ■

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FOOD & DRINK

Bier Garden presented by Hoptinger — behind 16 green

Near the Couples (rideshare) Entry. Choose from a variety of craft beer and bar bites from Hoptinger, a locally owned bier garden and sausage house.

The Oasis ft. Tito's Stillhouse Lounge

The Oasis is an air-conditioned venue with signature cocktails from Tito's Handmade Vodka, as well as food and drink available for purchase. The Oasis offers an enclosed lounge with premium sightlines of the newly reimagined 9th tee. The lounge also features fun additions for fans, including a putting green, Golden Tee retro arcade game, custom murals, TVs with live broadcasts of the tournament and more.

PROVIDED BY THE PGA TOUR

The Oasis features ABBQ – Serving up Texas style BBQ at the Beach.

Sawgrass Splash: the signature cocktail of THE PLAYERS

As part of the PGA TOUR's commitment to leading the advancement of sustainability in the industry, THE PLAYERS will be serving the tournament's signature drink, the Sawgrass Splash featuring Tito's Handmade Vodka, in a lightweight, aluminum cup. Aluminum is the most sustainable beverage packaging material and, like aluminum cans, aluminum cups can be easily recycled; the 16 oz cups are lightweight, sturdy, cool to the touch and provide an elevated drinking experience for all fans. While the cup is changing, the iconic Sawgrass Splash is staying the same; the drink will continue to feature Tito's Handmade Vodka, and a refreshing combination of orange juice, lemonade and lime juice.

Sawgrass Splash ingredients:

- 1.5 oz. Tito's Handmade Vodka
- 2 oz. lemonade
- 2 oz. orange juice
- Squeeze of lime juice

The Grove featuring Maestro Dobel

Enjoy 11 generations of tequila-making legacy at The Grove with Maestro Dobel Tequila, Official Tequila of the PGA TOUR and PGA TOUR Champions. Sharing its commitment to mastery with golf fans, Maestro Dobel offers three signature cocktails featuring its range of smooth tequilas, including the Ace Paloma, available at the entrance of the course. While in the lounge, experience Dobel's rich history and hone your tequila knowledge with the brand's tequila experts, while also learning about "Art of the Cocktail."

Filtered Water Stations

- Near No. 10 tee/No. 16 tee
- Wine & Dine on 9 (near No. 5 green/No. 9 fairway)
- Behind 16 green (near The Grove)
- Taste of JAX (Located behind 11 green and 12 tee)

Remember: THE PLAYERS will allow reusable plastic or metal cups up to 32 oz at entries, as long as they are empty.

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SCHEDULE OF EVENTS: THE PLAYERS CHAMPIONSHIP WEEK

Friday, March 8
• Noon to 5 p.m. The PGA TOUR Fan Shop is open to the public.

Saturday, March 9
• 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Military Job Fair
• 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The PGA TOUR Fan Shop is open to the public.

Sunday, March 10
• Noon to 1:30 p.m. Operation Shower
• 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The PGA TOUR Fan Shop is open to the public.

Monday, March 11
• Practice day for professionals
• Course closed to the public
• **Will Call Hours:** 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.
• THE PLAYERS Onesie Program: Every baby born in Northeast Florida during the entire week of THE PLAYERS receives a special onesie provided by THE PLAYERS.

PHOTO BY CRAIG O'NEAL

Tuesday, March 12 — Military Appreciation Day
• Entries open at 7:30 a.m.
• **Will Call Hours:** 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.
• Practice day for professionals
• 4:30 p.m. Military Appreciation Day Ceremony begins
• 5 p.m. Military Appreciation Concert

Wednesday, March 13
• Entries open at 7:30 a.m.
• **Will Call Hours:** 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.
• Practice day for professionals
• All day: THE PLAYERS Championship Caddie Competition in Memory of Bruce Edwards. Closest to the pin competition at the 17th hole amongst all of the caddies.
• 8-10 a.m. THE PLAYERS first-timers press conference — Media have the opportunity to interview the PGA TOUR players who are participating at THE PLAYERS Championship for the first time.
• 9-11 a.m. Dream Day at THE PLAYERS
• 9:30 to 11 a.m. "These Kids Can Play"

Thursday, March 14
• Entries open at 7:30 a.m.
• **Will Call Hours:** 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.
• First round of competition begins at 7:40 a.m.

Friday, March 15
• Entries open at 7:30 a.m.
• **Will Call Hours:** 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.
• Second round of competition begins at 7:40 a.m.

Saturday, March 16
• Entries open at 7:30 a.m.
• **Will Call Hours:** 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.
• Third round of competition begins at approximately 8:15 a.m., depending on the size of the cut (twosomes off No. 1)

Championship Sunday, March 17
• Entries open at 7:30 a.m.
• **Will Call Hours:** 7 a.m. to 4 p.m.
• Final round of competition begins at approximately 7:33 a.m., depending on size of the cut (twosomes off No. 1)

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MERCHANDISE

Location: PGA TOUR Fan Shop at THE PLAYERS Stadium Village (near the main entrance)

Free Early Access Merchandise Sale: The PGA TOUR Fan Shop will be open to the public the weekend before the tournament (March 8-10), so that our Northeast Florida community can check out the unique merchandise collection and purchase commemorative items and apparel. No ticket is required, and guests can park in the public parking lot off C.R. 210.

- Friday, March 8: Noon to 5 p.m.
- Saturday, March 9: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Sunday, March 10: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

What's New: The PGA TOUR Fan Shop has increased in size and is now more than 37,000 square feet.

PHOTOS BY ANTHONY RENDA
PGATOURENTERTAINMENT/PGA TOUR

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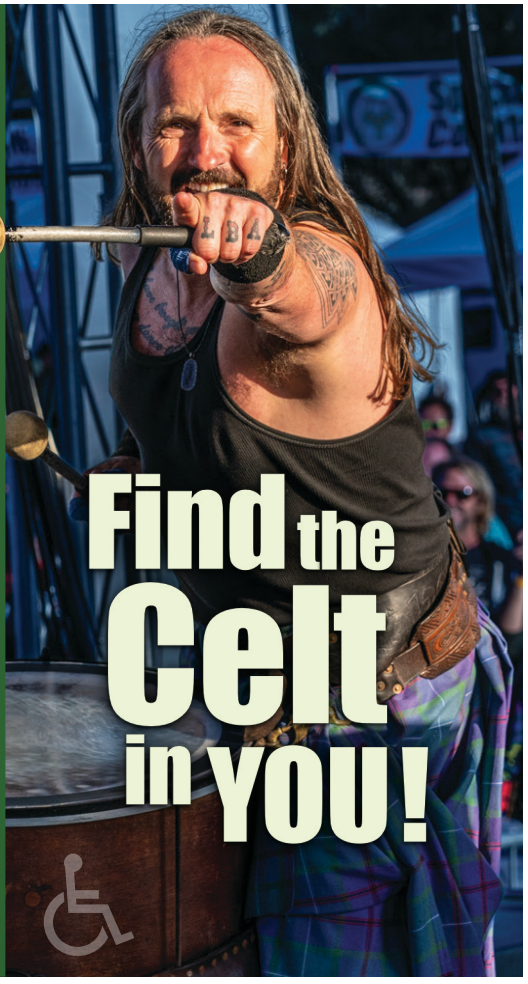

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Sources:
1. Market Scope 2020 IOL Market Report: A Global Analysis for 2019 to 2025.
2. US Food and Drug Administration. Summary of Safety and Effectiveness (SSED) of Light Adjustable Lens and Light Delivery Device system.

EVENTS

Swing for Success: Career Day at THE PLAYERS

Friday, March 8: 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

These Kids Can Play

Wednesday, March 13

9:30 to 11 a.m. in the Stadium Village

The PGA TOUR Wives Association, the Furyk Foundation and Everbank are teaming up to invite children and families of Community Peds Care (Community Hospice and Palliative Care Foundation) to experience activities and fun at THE PLAYERS Championship on Wednesday of tournament week. The event offers children and families a day to enjoy the tournament and specially chosen games and activities.

Dream Day at THE PLAYERS

Wednesday, March 13

9:30 to 11 a.m.

Two children from Dreams Come True and the Tom Coughlin Jay Fund will get their "Dream Day" at THE PLAYERS on Wednesday, where they will get the chance to sit inside the ropes on the Island Green 17th Hole and interact with players and caddies. Afterward, they will enjoy lunch and a behind-the-scenes tour.

THE PLAYERS Championship Caddie Competition in memory of Bruce Edwards

Wednesday, March 13

THE PLAYERS Championship Caddie Competition in memory of Bruce Edwards is a closest-to-the-pin competition on Wednesday of tournament week at the 17th hole. This is a great tradition unique to THE PLAYERS and one that provides an added layer of entertainment for the fans, players and caddies alike. The competition is named to honor Tom Watson's longtime caddie and friend Bruce Edwards, who passed away in 2004 from ALS or "Lou Gehrig's Disease."

The winning caddie will receive all player contributions to the pot, a personalized money clip, a VIP parking spot in the TPC Sawgrass Clubhouse lot and a personalized drawing commemorating the win.

Fans can keep track of how the caddies are doing, as closest-to-the-pin information will be provided on the leaderboards surrounding No. 17.

Billy Horschel's #DriveOutHunger campaign for Feeding Northeast Florida

Ongoing initiative through Sunday, March 12

Five-time PGA TOUR winner, 2014 FedExCup champion and Ponte Vedra Beach resident Billy Horschel once again will host his #DriveOutHunger campaign for Feeding Northeast Florida.

He will donate $1,000 for every birdie and $5,000 for every eagle that he makes during THE PLAYERS to Feeding Northeast Florida. Horschel is encouraging fa**ns and** supporters to do their part by going to feedingnefl.org and choosing "Billy Horschel's #DriveOutHunger Campaign" and then selecting their donation amount.

Morgan Stanley Eagles for Impact

Located along the 18th fairway, fans are invited to visit Morgan Stanley's Fan Experience to learn about their Eagles for Impact program benefiting the First Tee's Diverse Coaching Initiative and putt for a chance to make an eagle in the putting simulator, win prizes and more!

MILITARY APPRECIATION

THE PLAYERS Championship has a long-standing commitment to honoring Northeast Florida military members, veterans and their families.

Active-duty Service Member Tickets:

Complimentary admission will be provided to active duty, retired, reserve and National Guard members

and one dependent on Tuesday, March 12, and Wednesday, March 13, and one competition day (Thursday, March 14, to Sunday, March 17), while supplies last. Valid identification and credentials are required. All tickets also include a $20 digital voucher that can be used for food and nonalcoholic beverages on site.

Veteran Tickets:

Discounted admission will be provided to veterans and one dependent on Tuesday, March 12, and

Wednesday, March 13, and one competition day (Thursday, March 14, to Sunday, March 17), while supplies last. Valid identification and credentials are required. All tickets also include a $20 digital voucher that can be used for food and nonalcoholic beverages on-site.

To secure military and veteran tickets, follow these steps:

1. Visit THEPLAYERS.com/tickets and click CLAIM TICKETS in the Military Admission section.
2. Select your chosen tournament day(s).
3. Verify your military designation using GovX by selecting the link on the checkout page.
4. Once verified, complete the transaction and access your tickets on THE PLAYERS' digital portal.
5. Add your ticket(s) to your mobile wallet prior to arrival.

NOTE: Parking is not included in the complimentary, or discounted, ticket for military. Parking passes are required each day, Tuesday-Sunday, and can be purchased at THEPLAYERS.com/parking

Military Lounge – Patriots' Outpost presented by CSX

Throughout tournament week, service members, veterans and their dependents will have access to the Patriots' Outpost presented by CSX, an open-air hospitality space located near the tee at No. 16 that is reserved exclusively for the military and offers an upgraded hospitality space and complimentary snacks and beverages.

PGA TOUR Fan Shop discounts

On Tuesday, March 12, active duty, reserve and retired military members will receive a 20% discount in the PGA TOUR Fan Shop in the Stadium Village (must have valid military I.D.).

Military Appreciation Day – Tuesday, March 12

Each year, THE PLAYERS designates the Tuesday of tournament week as Military Appreciation Day in order to honor and recognize men and women who are serving or have served our country, especially those who call Northeast Florida home. The 2024 Military Appreciation Day will feature a ceremony and concert from country music star Cole Swindell starting at 4:30 p.m. on the Island Green 17th Hole.

Flyover Tradition Continues

The annual tradition of a flyover on Military Appreciation will continue and will feature the 125th Fighter Wing.

Military Job Fair

- Saturday, March 9 (10 a.m. to 1 p.m.)
- Location: Patriots' Outpost presented by CSX
- THE PLAYERS, in partnership with the Jacksonville Military Veterans Coalition, will host its 12th annual Military Job Fair. The Military Job Fair is free and open to military personnel, veterans and military spouses. Approximately 30 companies with existing job opportunities will be on site.

Operation Shower

Sunday, March 10 (noon to 2 p.m.)

Location: Patriots' Outpost presented by CSX

THE PLAYERS and Operation Shower continue a longstanding tradition of hosting a baby shower ahead of the championship for 50 special military mothers-to-be. The shower will be held in the Patriots' Outpost venue, located next to the 16th hole.

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HOW SCOTTIE SCHEFFLER WON THE PLAYERS

by KATHY BISSELL

Scottie Scheffler knew it wouldn't be easy to win THE PLAYERS. Before joining the PGA Tour, before college golf at the University of Texas, before high school golf and his mountain of victories there, and even before playing in the Junior Players Championship, he had played TPC Sawgrass. His first round was with his dad, and he remembers his tee shot on the island 17th.

"It was just us two, and just going out there and having fun," he recalled. "I think I hit a pretty good shot."

Visions of things to come?

"Anytime when you see stuff on TV, it always looks so much larger than life, whether it's a person or a hole or a golf course, and then you get out there, and you're like: Okay, wait, like it's a normal-sized green, and I can do this," he said about the experience.

Yes, he could do it. Last year, in just his fourth season on the PGA Tour, he won THE PLAYERS. It's a huge tournament. It's the PGA Tour's major. It's never an easy one to win, but by the end of the week, he made it look that way.

Scheffler came to Ponte Vedra after a ridiculously tough tournament, the Arnold Palmer Invitational at Bay Hill, where he finished tied for 4th. The Bay Hill course is difficult in the best of conditions, and last year, there was a lot of wind — gusts 25 to 35 mph — on two days of the tournament.

"I would say that, if we were to do that every week, I would probably get a little bit worn out," he admitted before THE PLAYERS began.

PHOTO BY CRAIG O'NEAL

SCOTTIE SCHEFFLER WAS THE WINNER OF THE 2023 PLAYERS CHAMPIONSHIP.

> "You can't limp in on this golf course. You got to hit the shots."
>
> — SCOTTIE SCHEFFLER

Of course, The Arnold Palmer was just a warm-up for the brutality of the ridiculously difficult TPC Sawgrass.

"If we were playing a video game, I don't think it would be very challenging," he said about TPC Sawgrass. "But it's golf and there' s elements …"

Sure, elements like massive amounts of water, ever-present trees, yawning bunkers, nasty slopes and always the magic of Pete Dye's wicked imagination trying his hardest – as he used to say – "to give today's golfers the same kind of tough test Mr. Hogan faced when he played that famous 1-iron at Merion."

As Scheffler put it, "It's challenging, and you don't always hit it where you are looking, so anytime on this golf course — basically on any hole, anytime you get out of position here, it's a very challenging hole."

That's the thing about TPC Sawgrass. It's just so easy to be in the wrong spot when you didn't intend to. And there are sooooo many wrong spots. And a lot of them have water. Or sand. Some of them even have teeth, like the alligator who paddles around in the lake surrounding the 17th island green.

"If you're hitting every shot exactly how you want to, which is pretty much impossible in a round of golf, it's pretty easy," Scheffler added. Nobody ever hits every shot the way they want to, even PGA Tour pros.

The other thing about TPS Sawgrass is that the golf course just plain loathes everybody. You, me, Scheffler, Rickie Fowler, Justin Thomas, Rory McIlroy, Fred Couples, Davis Love III, Nick Price, even Tiger Woods and all the fine professionals who have dared to win on it. The course shows equal opportunity hatred. You could swear it snarls and growls during play.

But regardless of the tough week at Bay Hill, the unpredictability and nastiness of TPC Sawgrass, the fickleness of the bunkers and the treachery of the water, Scheffler seemed ready to go.

Thursday, he began his assault on the course and the field. While he may have wanted to lead from the start, other things happened.

Chad Ramey, a Mississippi State golfer who won the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28 ■

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■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 26

Corales Puntacana Championship in 2022, was atop the scores after round one at 8-under par. Collin Morikawa, past PGA and British Open champ, was next at 7-under. Taylor Pendrith and Ben Griffin were tied, three shots back of the lead. And Scheffler was one of eight tied at 4-under par, four shots behind. Still, it was a decent start.

During round two it had been off and on windy all day with gusts to the low 20s. Then, weather brought the second round to a halt right around 4:30. There were 71 players still on the course, and they had to come back the next morning to start play again around 7 a.m.

By mid-morning on Saturday, the second round was finished, and Scheffler had clawed up the leaderboard a bit, improving his position. After round two, he was in second alone, two shots back of Adam Svensson, who won the 2022 RSM Classic.

Saturday is usually called moving day, because it's the third round and the last chance to really leap up and threaten the leader before Sunday's final battle. And Scheffler took advantage, posting a 65 that put him in the top spot, right where he wanted to be. Or at least where we think he wanted to be. Where all golfers really want to be is in the lead after 18 holes on Sunday, not Saturday.

Scheffler admitted that he was very nervous before beginning the Sunday round. When he had the lead going into the final round at the Masters that he won, he was an emotional mess. It's not completely uncommon, but we usually don't know about it.

Golfers don't tell us everything, after all.

"This tournament feels like a major championship to me, and this morning was tough," he said, but he didn't elaborate. Nobody pressed him on it.

When the final round began, Scheffler was at 14-under par and two ahead of Min Woo Lee of Australia who won the 2023 Fortinet. Lee, a member of four tours, was a formidable challenger with victories all around the world. Cam Davis, also of Australia, was four back of Scheffler.

Christiaan Bezuidenhout — don't you always want to say Bless You! when you see his name — Aaron Rai, Chad Ramey and Tommy Fleetwood were next, all tied at 9-under, five shots back.

Things happened right away. Min Woo Lee birdied the first hole. Scheffler parred it, having rescued himself from the left pine straw and trees.

Neither player distinguished himself on the 2nd hole, but they both salvaged par. Then they came to the 3rd. Scheffler hit over the green, not far, no more than a few inches, but an inch might as well be a mile sometimes in golf. He chipped up toward the hole, then missed his par putt. A stroke of his lead was sacrificed there. Lee made par.

Then at the 4th, it was Lee's turn to confront TPC Sawgrass. His drive was adequate except that it was in the rough. He hit out, just trying to get into the fairway so he'd have a good look at the green from the fairway. From there, Lee hit a terrible tee shot. It landed in the water in front of the 4th green. So, a penalty was coming. That hole looks so easy, but one false move and it jumps up and bites people. It's always

CONTINUED ON PAGE 32 ■

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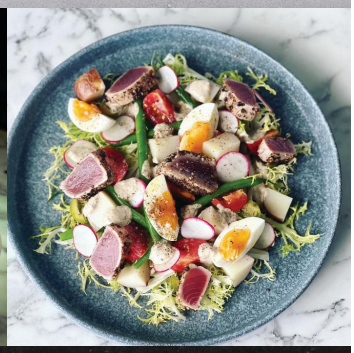

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■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 28

waiting with its menacing, evil smile, and sharp teeth.

So, after hitting over the water to the green again, and making a couple of putts to finally get the ball in the hole, Lee had a triple bogey. That's how fast bad things happen at TPC Sawgrass. As Scheffler said, there are elements!

The two steadied their ships and marched on to the rest of the front nine. Lee birdied the 7th, but he bogeyed the 8th.

Scheffler had a great miracle hole out on the 8th for birdie and followed that up with birdie on the 9th . The round had turned in his favor. Mojo seemed on his side. Never mess with Mojo when it shows up. Put your arm around it and give it a hug!

Scheffler just kept the pedal on the floor and got three more birdies in a row at 10, 11 and 12. That was five in all, and it put him at 18-under par.

Lee, on the other hand, had a double at the 11th and a garden variety bogey at the 14th. A bogey at the 14th is almost like a par. It's a tough hole. It's set up awkwardly by Pete You-Know-Who. It's just a challenge to get the golf ball in the right spot. After that mistake, Lee was out of the tournament, practically speaking.

Scheffler also had issues with the 14th. He was in such deep rough on the right that he was just trying to get out. He nearly ran the ball across to the left rough. So, three shots to get to the green instead of two and there you go, bogey at 14th. He fell back to 17-under.

Then other guys started making a run at Scheffler.

Tyrrell Hatton had seven birdies on the back nine, but he was far enough back that it only got him to 12- under par, five back of Scheffler.

Viktor Hovland had a run of four birdies in five holes at the 9th, 11th, 12th and 13th, but he couldn't get more under par. He finished at 10-under.

Hideki Matsuyama appeared on the leaderboard after making seven birdies through the 13th hole, but his charge ended with a double at the 14th, and he had an added insult from a garden variety bogey on the 18th .

Max Homa looked like he might do something when he birdied the 10th, eagled the 11th and birdied the 12th, but even a par instead of the double he had at the 17th would not have put him close to Scheffler's 17-under.

They all fired at him, but Scheffler was just too far ahead for it to make much difference.

"It was so challenging that I wanted to get as big of a lead as I could because you could hit a really good shot on 17 this afternoon and go in the water," Scheffler said about the final round. "I didn't want to focus on a four-shot lead. I wanted to focus on beating the course."

In the end, Scheffler did what he needed to do. Made fewer mistakes than the rest of the field on a course known for catastrophes. He parred when they bogeyed. He waited for what he felt would be his run of birdies in the round, took them and held on.

In the end, Scheffler played steady, conservative golf. Other than the hole-out at the 8th, it wasn't flashy. But it wasn't mistake-prone, and that was the key. It's

CONTINUED ON PAGE 38 ■

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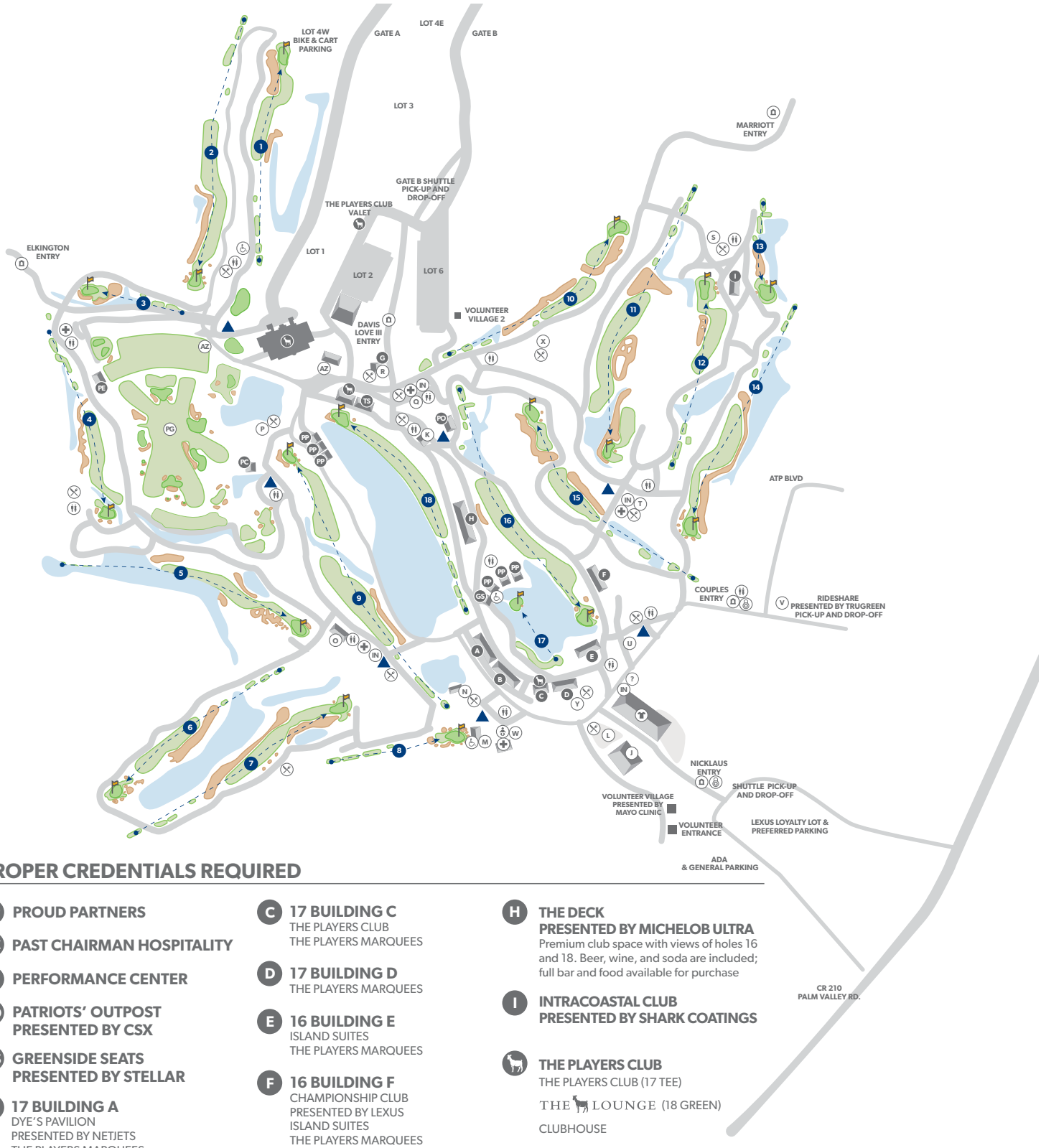

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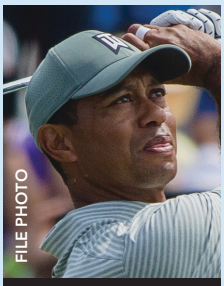
2013: Tiger Woods & Sergio Garcia – Duel in the Swamp


FILE PHOTO

TIGER WOODS

In 2013, the ultimate golf cage match took place between Tiger Woods and Sergio Garcia. Garcia had the misfortune, like many golfers, to be playing competitively at the same time as Tiger Woods. Not much more needs to be said about that. So was Ernie Els, Phil Mickelson, Davis Love, Jim Furyk and many others.

At that point in his career, Woods ate trophies for lunch, it seemed. He snacked on majors for dinner. Playing against him, for many years, was a fools' errand, but people had to try. Such was the fate of Sergio Garcia. It annoyed the living daylights out of him.

In 2013, the visceral feelings came to a head at THE PLAYERS. Woods had already won three times since January, most recently at the Arnold Palmer Invitational. He was licking his chops thinking about snacking on another trophy. He was up to No. 77 in victories, looking for 78. If he'd actually had claws, you could imagine that he would have slashed a tree thinking about it. You know, with a growl.

PHOTO BY DON CHRISTIAN

SERGIO GARCIA

After round two, Garcia was actually one ahead of Woods. As it turned out, they would play together in round three. On the second hole, things exploded on Garcia's end.

He was in the fairway where his tee shot landed, and Woods was, well, in the woods on the left. In amongst the pine straw and some gallery. A lot of gallery. Woods could not see Garcia or much else because he was blocked on three sides by a herd of people. His only view was to the green and there were people lining a corridor to let him hit.

Garcia thought he was away. He had a club out and was taking practice swings. No one disagreed with any of that, but as golfers are wont to do, Woods was getting ready on his end also. He took out a wood prior to Garcia taking a shot and the crowd cheered, knowing he was going to the green.

Garcia thought Woods was trying to annoy him on purpose, to interfere with his second shot. He took offense.

His shot to the green ended up on the right, near some trees. He was more than miffed. He was two breaths short of becoming a volcano, mainly because he made a double bogey on the hole and was looking for someone other than himself to blame. His error had taken him out of the lead.

NBC showed the timing of the incident, and it was clear that Woods did not pull a club in the middle of Garcia's swing. But Garcia would have none of it.

Later, when there was a rain delay, Garcia commented for NBC.

"It was my shot to hit. He moved all the

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THE PLAYERS' 50TH ANNIVERSARY

■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 36

crowd he needed to move, and I waited for that," he said. "I want to say that he didn't see that I was ready. But you have a feel when the other guy is going to hit."

In other words, Garcia thought Woods took out his club at that point in time on purpose to distract Garcia from an important shot.

After his round, Woods said, "The marshals told me he already hit, so I pulled a club."

Fortunately for everyone, Garcia and Woods were not playing together for the final round. It was Garcia and David Lingmerth going last with Woods in the group just ahead of them. Scoring-wise, Woods and Garcia traded blows for the entire round.

The climax of the battle came when Garcia reached the 17th hole. He and Woods were tied at that point. Woods went under the barrier to the 18th tee and Garcia faced his fate, which in this case turned out to be two balls in the water for a quadruple bogey.

Not in Garcia's plan. He was done in by that nasty little Island Green the way so many before him and after him have been. Then, as often happens after a big disaster, Garcia also put one in the water off the 18th tee. A final insult.

"That hole has been good to me for the most part," Garcia said about the 17th after his round. "Today, it wasn't."

Total understatement. Thus ended the Duel in the Swamp.

Woods ended up with five victories that season, the last time he was able to do that.

— K Bissell

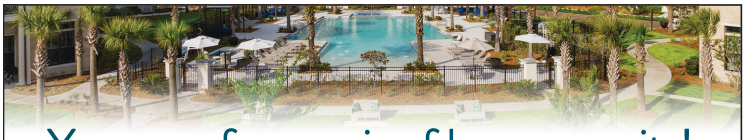
■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 32

PHOTO BY CRAIG O'NEAL

always the key around TPC Sawgrass, which is, no doubt, one of the nastiest courses on Earth.

"I get excited for a good hard test," Scheffler said after winning. "I feel like that I can find a way to make pars and hang in there. And I mean, this week I think I had five bogeys for the whole week. Around this place, that's really, really, I would say, hard to do, and that's probably what I'm most proud of — is just playing so solid."

Scheffler returns to TPC Sawgrass with his No. 1 ranking intact. He held it first in March of 2022 and after trading back and forth with a couple of players no longer on the PGA Tour, he remains the dominant player in golf. Could he be the first player to repeat as champ? Or will we see Rory McIlroy, Viktor Hovland, Xander Schauffele, Justin Thomas, Patrick Cantlay, Wyndham Clark or some other player step up to challenge his position? One way or another, it's going to be a great week of golf.



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THE 5 MOST IMPORTANT PLAYERS CHAMPIONSHIPS

by KATHY BISSELL

The idea for a Tournament Players Championship came from the second PGA Tour Commissioner, Deane Beman, who was also responsible for moving the Tour from Washington, D.C., to Ponte Vedra Beach. (All thank Deane!)

He knew the PGA Tour could not control the Masters or the U.S. Open or the PGA or the Open Championship. But all the Tour players made those events happen and made them memorable. What Beman wanted for the PGA Tour players was a tournament that was every bit as big and important and memorable as the other biggies. While the jury may still be out in some circles, it isn't with the PGA Tour players who have won it or with anybody who lives in Ponte Vedra. This thing is a BIG, BIG deal.

After starting the tournament, Beman decided that what the PGA Tour needed were golf courses that made it easy for fans to actually see the golfers, and that was the beginning of the TPC courses, the first one of which was TPC Sawgrass.

1974: Jack Nicklaus & The First PLAYERS

You can't have a 50th anniversary if you don't have a first one. Fortunately, for the championship, the first winner was already a legend, Jack Nicklaus. What a way to start a tournament legacy.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY PGA TOUR

Then called the Tournament Players Championship (or TPC), it was held at the Atlanta Country Club. After winning, Nicklaus told the Associated Press that the victory had salvaged the year for him because he had not won any majors that season. The tournament was held in September. It was only his second victory that year, the first one being the Hawaiian Open, which was held in February.

The way the 1974 PLAYERS unfolded, Nicklaus was never in the lead until the final day. At the end of round three, J.S. Snead was at the top. Nicklaus, who was 34 years old at the time, was three back but made a final round charge that included six birdies.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 44 ■

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■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 42

"I didn't want to let this one get away from me once I got in a position to win," Nicklaus reportedly said.

It was Nicklaus' 53rd victory. He had won just over $2.2 million in his career up to that time. The title put his season winnings at $208,307. He was second that year to Johnny Miller who had earned $256,383.

Nicklaus' first place check was worth $50,000. Snead's second place prize was $28,500. Other high finishers included Bruce Crampton in third and Gene Littler in fourth. Littler became the eighth player to reach the million-dollar mark in career earnings with his winnings of $11,750. Arnold Palmer and Gary Player failed to make the cut.

Nicklaus would go on to win THE PLAYERS two more times, in 1976 at Inverrary CC in South Florida, which hosted the Jackie Gleason tournament for many years, and at Sawgrass CC in 1978.

Davis Love III, who would win THE PLAYERS twice, remembers the Atlanta Classic — also held at Atlanta CC — happening right in his back yard when he was young. Love's father, Davis Love Jr., was the head professional there.

"I've watched the PGA TOUR event in my backyard in Atlanta," he said. "Then it turned into THE PLAYERS Championship." Love would have been 12 at the time of the first PLAYERS. Did he know he would win two of them?

Later on, Love's father would become the head professional at Sea Island Golf Club in Georgia. He was a renowned golf instructor.

1982: Jerry Pate, The Dive and TPC Sawgrass

TPC Sawgrass actually opened for play in 1980, but it wasn't until 1982 that THE PLAYERS — still known as the TPC — was held on it. The first time the tournament was played on the new track, it made headlines as well as enemies.

Jerry Pate had come to the course for the opening, and that day, he played 18 holes with Commissioner Beman, who explained to Pate during the round exactly how to be successful on the course.

When tournament time arrived, Pate decided that, if he won, he would toss both Beman and course designer Pete Dye into the lake at the 18th. He won. He tossed. They splashed. The tournament and the course became instantly infamous around the world.

However, complaints about the design of the course ensued, and many have not stopped to this day.

According to a Sports Illustrated article written by former Ponte Vedra resident the late, great Dan Jenkins, some of the comments by the PGA Tour players were:

Jack Nicklaus: "This course plays all around my game and never touches it. I've never been very good at stopping a five-iron on the hood of a car."

Fuzzy Zoeller: "Where are the windmills and animals?"

John Mahaffey: "There's no mystery here. All you have to do is hit a perfect drive, a perfect second shot and a perfect putt. What I'm still trying to find out

CONTINUED ON PAGE 46 ■

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■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 44

is whether you win a free game if you make a putt on the last hole."

Tom Watson: "Is it against the rules to carry a bulldozer in your bag?"

Ed Sneed: "Pete Dye ought to be fined for slow play."

J.C. Snead: "This course is 90% horse manure and 10% luck."

And those were the printable comments.

Even Jenkins got into the act, saying the course had "the severest targets in golf." As was often the case, he was right.

However, after the first playing of THE PLAYERS at the new course, Jenkins also wrote:

"If Pete Dye is the Leonardo of golf course architects, Jerry Pate is surely the Esther Williams of touring pros, and the two of them pooled their talents last week to elevate the Tournament Players Championship into one of golf's major events. Call it the game's fifth major if you like … but the fact is, the player with the best swing and the most potential in the game today, Jerome K. Pate, went out and Ben Hoganed the daylights out of the most demanding new layout in the world today, winning the TPC against the toughest field you could have assembled today. And if all this doesn't make the TPC a major championship, then Jerry Pate, Tour Commissioner Deane Beman and Dye can't swim a stroke."

Jenkins, the guy who hated most everything but Ben Hogan most of the time, called THE PLAYERS a major back in 1982.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY PGA TOUR

1985: Calvin Peete, First African-American Champ

Calvin Peete's victory was important. Significantly, he was the first African-American to win THE PLAYERS. But that week no one talked about his race. They talked about his play.

"For a week, I played in the best field in golf, and emerged victorious," Peete told the Florida Times-Union. "And it was the first time my father had walked 18 holes and watched me win a tournament. It wasn't just my victory. It was also his."

"Calvin was the bridge between the time African-Americans couldn't play on the PGA Tour and Tiger Woods," Pete McDaniel, author of "Uneven Lies: The Heroic Story of African-Americans in Golf," told the Florida Times-Union. "He was the best of all of the early African-American players and conducted himself with incredible dignity and class."

The final round of that year's PLAYERS was a contest between D.A. Weibring, Hale Irwin and Peete. They were tied for the lead after round three. Most would have put money on Irwin, who had already won two U.S. Opens, to beat the other two.

"I thought if I shot under par on the back nine, I could win," Weibring told Sports Illustrated.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 48 ■

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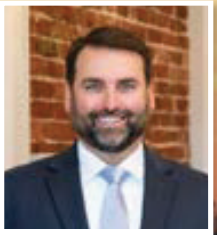
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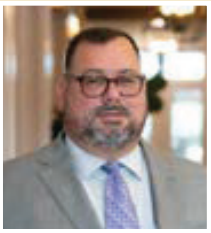
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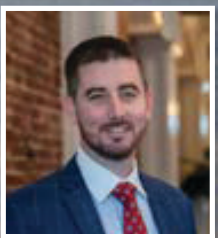
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■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 46

"I did what I wanted and still lost by three shots."

"I could have had every good bounce and break there was, and I couldn't have beaten Cal," Irwin said to the same publication.

Something that's not often mentioned is that Peete was perhaps the only person with a disability to win THE PLAYERS. His arm had been broken in his younger days, and it did not heal properly. As a result, he couldn't straighten it. Whether that helped or hurt his golf game, we will never know. It did restrict his swing. But the result was that Peete was a very straight hitter. According to stats, Peete was first in driving accuracy and second in greens in regulation the year before his PLAYERS victory.

As the winner of THE PLAYERS in 1985, he took home $162,000 for winning. Peete's score of 70-69-69-66-274 was 14-under par, breaking the record set by Fred Couples in 1984 by three shots.

"The crowd was fantastic," Peete said about the fans. "Let me tell you, the gallery at THE PLAYERS is as good as anywhere in golf, Augusta National included."

FILE PHOTO

1987: Sandy Lyle, First Foreign Winner

Sandy Lyle was one of a small group of big time European players who created a wave of victories in majors and in the Ryder Cup beginning in the 1980s. Golfers like Seve Ballesteros, Ian Woosnam, Bernhard Langer, Nick Faldo and Lyle were a force to face.

In 1985, Lyle became the first British winner of The Open Championship since Tony Jacklin. Then there was THE PLAYERS in 1987. And in 1988, he won the Masters.

Lyle's PLAYERS title came in a sudden death playoff with Jeff Sluman, which included a shocking development created by a spectator.

Sluman and Lyle were on the second hole of a playoff, on the Island Green, and Sluman had a six-foot putt to win. Just as Sluman addressed his putt, an overserved spectator jumped into the water. Sluman backed off, started again and missed the putt. The two went on to the 18th hole, which was won by Lyle. That gave him the tournament title.

"I had the 1-iron going and kept the ball in play and felt good about my game," Lyle said.

Sluman did not blame the spectator. Golf Digest caught up with both of them him in 2022. The jumper was Hal Valdes. In 1987, he was a student at Florida State, and he and a friend decided to attend the tournament. When asked what he was thinking to have done that at the time, he indicated thinking wasn't involved.

"We had been out all night, and we got there, and then we were at a corporate tent all day," he explained to Golf Digest.

They were definitely not sober at this juncture. Then, his friend

CONTINUED ON PAGE 50 ■

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■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 48

made a bet with him. It was along the lines of: I bet you $500 you won't jump in.

"Back in 1987 in college, that was probably three months worth of living," Valdes noted. $500? No brainer. In he went.

Sluman got confused about what was going on because he was focused on his putt. The fans saw Valdes and started to boo him. Sluman said he didn't even hear the splash or anything else until the booing started.

He told Golf Digest, "To this day, I don't know if he slid, belly-flopped in. I didn't hear anything. All of sudden I just hear this whistling and booing so I step back."

So, it was the booing that caused him to back off, not the spectator.

Lyle won in the first year that THE PLAYERS total purse was $1 million. His share for the victory was $180,000.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY PGA TOUR

2001: Tiger Woods "Better Than Most"

It's impossible to have a top five of anything in golf without Tiger Woods. He won his first of two PLAYERS titles in 2001, part of the year-long period when he won the U.S. Open, The Open Championship, the PGA, THE PLAYERS and the Masters in that order. It's called the Tiger Slam because it wasn't the traditional Grand Slam, but as Woods noted, he had all the trophies on his mantel at one time. No one else has done that.

The "better than most" putt didn't come in the final round, but it was a predictor of the finish.

Woods began the third round of the 2001 PLAYERS six shots behind Jerry Kelly. And it was late in that round, at the 17th hole, that he hit his "better than most" putt, a 60-foot, triple-breaker for birdie.

"There has been nothing, as far being a sheer, scintillating moment [in THE PLAYERS], like that putt," NBC golf anchor Dan Hicks said in a story published by Sky Sports.

Later, Woods explained how he knew where to start the putt. It was all thanks to Fred Funk.

"The truth is that I had a little teach before that putt," Woods said. "We had a delay there on the 17th tee, and Fred Funk was playing right in front of us. He hit it up on the top shelf, and he four-putted the hole, and so I saw how as it came over the rise and as it started going to the right, how much it picked up speed."

After sinking the miraculous putt, Woods finished round three tied for second with Vijay Singh. They were both two back of Kelly.

As though that wasn't enough drama, the final round on Sunday was halted for weather with the leaders having nine holes to play. The tournament finished on Monday.

Of interest to some was that Woods won the previous week at Bay Hill in Arnold Palmer's tournament before coming to Ponte Vedra for THE PLAYERS.

The 2001 PLAYERS was Woods' 26th career PGA Tour victory.

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NEW PLAYERS TO WATCH

PHOTO BY CRAIG O'NEAL

by KATHY BISSELL

There are some new golfers on the PGA Tour, and you'll likely see at least some of them at THE PLAYERS. Some of them are already PGA Tour winners or DP World Tour winners. Others look like they will be at some point in time. Several of them are from Europe but went to school in the U.S., like Ludvig Aberg.

Aberg, pronounced Oh-berg — who knows why; it's Swedish — went to Texas Tech and was a standout there. Aberg became the first player to join the PGA Tour right out of college by finishing No. 1 in the PGA Tour University Ranking.

From college, Aberg played on the DP World Tour in Europe and won the Omega European Masters in September, just before the Ryder Cup.

Then he came back to the U.S. where he won the RSM Classic, Davis Love III's tournament, which was the last PGA Tour event in 2023.

"My main priority is America and the PGA TOUR," he said at the RSM Classic before he won. "It's been that way since I turned pro, and I feel like that's what I want to do. I want to come over here, I wanted to improve my status and try to play tournaments and try to get into the big events for next year, so that's what I'm trying to do."

As it turned out, Aberg's victory at the RSM got him a two-year exemption on the PGA Tour and entry to this year's Masters and PLAYERS.

At the RSM, he tied the low score in PGA Tour history in a 72-hole event. He won by a record seven shots and had the low closing 36-hole score in PGA Tour history, posting back-to-back 61s.

And when he gets mad on the golf course, he swears in Swedish. (I asked at the RSM! Hey, we all get mad on the golf course.)

Nicolai Hojgaard

Nicolai Hojgaard is half of a set of twins. His brother Rasmus is also a professional golfer and they have the distinction of winning back-to-back weeks on the DP World Tour. Rasmus won the Omega European Masters one week, and Nicolai won the Italian Open the following week.

Most recently, Nicolai won the DP World Tour Championship, defeating Viktor Hovland and Tommy Fleetwood.

Hojgaard made his first entry to the PGA Tour in 2023 at the Corales Puntacana Championship and finished solo-second. That top-10 allowed him to play in the Valero Texas Open, where he received Special Temporary Membership due to a tie for 28th.

Now he's waiting for his twin to find a way to the U.S.

Hojgaard's name is pronounced Hoy-gard. He's from Denmark. Between Aberg and Hojgaard, we're all going to have to go to a couple of Berlitz language clinics to be able to cheer these guys on!

Eric Cole

Eric Cole had a completely opposite path to the PGA Tour than the first two. He has had a career as a mini-tour player for years and has 54 mini-tour victories, the last one coming in December of 2021. Cole qualified once before for the PGA Tour but lost his card.

Last season, at age 35, he nearly won the final Honda Classic. In the fall of 2023, he was 4th at Fortinet, 3rd at Shriners, 2nd at ZOZO and 3rd at the RSM Classic. He finished 43rd in FedEx points, and that vaulted him into the top 50 in points, meaning he is into all the Signature events in 2024.

Cole has golf in his blood, literally. His mother is Laura Baugh and his father is Bobby Cole. It's likely that more people remember

CONTINUED ON PAGE 56 ■

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■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 52

his mother than his father.

Baugh was rookie of the year on the LPGA in 1973, and was the youngest winner of the U.S. Women's Amateur at the time in 1971. She was 16. Baugh had many promotional contracts when she turned professional, including with Ford, Rolex, Suzuki, The Ladies Home Journal, Wilson, Bermuda's Tourist Bureau and Colgate Palmolive. Bobby Cole, who is from South Africa, was the second youngest winner of the British Amateur. Cole won tournaments in South Africa and also the 1977 Buick Open. He played on the PGA Tour Champions circuit from 1998 to 2001.

Baugh and Cole had seven children. Today, she heads up the The Laura Baugh Golf Schools at Palencia Country Club in St. Augustine.

Ben Kohles

While not a PGA Tour rookie, Ben Kohles re-earned his PGA Tour card for the third time via the Korn Ferry Tour. Kohles lives in Ponte Vedra Beach, and he plays and practices at TPC Sawgrass.

Last season, Kohles finished No. 1 on the Korn Ferry Tour points list with two victories: Astara Chile Classic and the HomeTown Lenders Championship. Kohles played four seasons at University of Virginia, where he set a school record for victories with seven. He was Atlantic Coast Conference Player of the Year two times, one time as a co-winner with Brooks Koepka.

He is the only Korn Ferry player to win his first two starts, which were the Nationwide Children's Hospital Championship and the Cox Classic.

Parker and Pierceson Coody

The Coody brothers are interesting rookies to the PGA Tour for two reasons in addition to their golf games. They are the third set of twins to play golf on the PGA Tour. And they have a famous grandfather.

The first twins were Curtis and Allan Strange. Curtis went on to win back-to-back U.S. Open titles among the 17 PGA Tour titles he held. Then he was a television commentator for several different networks and still appears on ESPN. Allan played on the PGA Tour for several years, but he left professional golf to focus on a career in investments.

Then, Daryl and Derek Fathauer both played in the Ginn sur Mer Classic. Derek went on to play in 154 PGA Tour events in his career. Daryl did not. However, they did not both have PGA Tour membership at the same time.

Now it's the Coody twins, grandsons of Charlie Coody who won the Masters in 1971 after surviving a three-way battle for the title with Jack Nicklaus and Johnny Miller. It doesn't get tougher than that! As a result, Coody played in the 1971 Ryder Cup. Coody also won the Dallas Open in 1964, the Cleveland Open Invitational in 1969 and the World Series of Golf in 1971. He had two European Tour victories and then won five times on the PGA Tour Champions.

Now, we have Parker and Pierceson Coody, fresh out of the University of Texas and through to the PGA Tour. Whether they will have made enough money or have enough FedEx points to enter THE PLAYERS remains to be seen, but they are players to watch for the future.

Pierceson finished No. 1 in the 2022 PGA TOUR University Ranking and joined the Korn Ferry Tour, where he won three times.

Parker joined the 2022 PGA TOUR Canada circuit as a result of the PGA TOUR University program and won his seventh start on the circuit. He then joined the 2023 Korn Ferry Tour and has now qualified for the PGA Tour by being top 30 in Korn Ferry.

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1996: Fred Couples' Eagle, Birdie, Par Finish

FRED COUPLES

Fred Couples had a love/hate relationship with TPC Sawgrass. He used to say that when he first played it, he never made a cut. And he was right, at least until 1984 when he won. While he may have been a surprise winner that year — even to himself — by the late 1980s, he was a threat every time he teed it up. That said, in 1996, he didn't lead until the very end.

In writing about that year's tournament for Sports Illustrated, Rick Reilly said Couples was allergic to practice. That wasn't the case. Couples had a back problem that kept him from practicing. However, bad back or not, one thing was certain, Couples knew the course. He had set the record twice.

Using wood woods and balata balls, he had posted a record 64 when he won for the first time in 1984. Amazingly, in that round, he had bogeys on the first and last holes. Then in 1992, he shot a 63 out of the blue. That was the year Davis Love III won for the first time.

But in 1996, the story wasn't about records. It was all about the wet conditions and Tommy Tolles, who had played on the Nike Tour, with two wins, and the PGA Tour.

After three rounds, Tolles was two shots ahead of David Duval. Couples was in fifth place, tied with Ernie Els and Colin Montgomerie, four back of Tolles. Couples was close enough to have a chance, but he would have to have a couple of scoring miracles or a birdie barrage, and he would need some help from those who were ahead of him and those tied with him. Nothing dramatic happened early.

On the 8th Couples' ball landed just two feet from the hole. Birdie. It was helpful.

By end of the first nine, he was only one behind the leaders, Tolles and Montgomerie.

No one performed any heroics until almost the end of the round. That's when Couples came to the 16th. For his second shot, Couples and caddie Joe LaCava decided on a 2-iron. Couples hung it out a little too far to the right, and it was almost possible to hear thousands of people gasp. Then when the ball found the right side of the green, they exhaled with a huge roar.

"It was a perfect club," he said. "I cut the ball and I actually overcut it, and it was hanging, and I thought it was in the water for sure."

Then the next miracle he needed happened.

Couples made the 25-foot putt and the gallery exploded. It was so loud, you could feel the ground shake. Yes. Fred Couples made the earth move. After that, he made a 30-foot birdie putt on the island 17th. More explosive noise, not quite at the same decibel level as for the eagle, but loud. They knew what Couples knew. He was probably going to win the tournament. And, of course, he did. Eagle, birdie, par did it.

"I wasn't really planning on playing 'til I was 46, but at least now I will be exempt if I am," Couples said in his post round interview. He shot a final round 64.

— K Bissell

AI – ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE – IS ALREADY IN GOLF

by KATHY BISSELL

Artificial Intelligence has more than crept into golf. It came in years ago, built a couple houses for itself and fired up the barbecue grill. It's here to stay.

There's so much AI in golf that it would make your head spin, but only if you were an artificial person or a particular actress in "The Exorcist." AI is in the PGA Tour television broadcasts, nearly all golf equipment and golf course design, to name some big examples. And it's not new to golf. It's been around for several years.

You just have to think about what artificial intelligence really is to realize that we've all been using it for some time. Basically, AI uses computers to predict performance of something, like a golf club or a golf ball or even of a golfer.

For the PGA Tour, for THE PLAYERS and other tournaments, AI may have shown up first with Shotlink. You know, that graphic that shows how many players have hit balls on the fairway or rough or who has hit the green? Or stats that show how far a drive went? That is part of a program called Shotlink that was actually developed by the PGA Tour with a company in Jacksonville that was called IDS (now SportsMEDIA Technology Corporation) and by IBM.

You also see their work when you go to the stats page at PGA Tour.com. Or when you click on a player's name on the leaderboard and then click on a golf hole where it shows you the location of every shot hit by every player.

By having this data, it's possible to make some predictions on how well players will play based on what they have been doing recently. That might be important if you wanted to make a bet, for instance.

Data for the PGA Tour's Shotlink system is gathered by volunteers each week. The way it works was explained in the Columbus Dispatch (Ohio) about eight years ago. According to that story, there are two lasers on each of the 18 holes on a golf course. (I'm going to guess there is probably just one on each of the par threes, but the Dispatch said two per hole.)

One laser is halfway down the hole and the other one is by the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 60 ■

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■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 59

green. (That is why it seems that on par threes, there's probably only one laser.)

After a golf ball lands, volunteers shoot a laser beam to it, and that records its position on the course. And because it's always good to have a backup, volunteers also put a dot on a paper grid to show the hole and the location of the ball. A camera then measures the second shot, and the third if needed.

The laser measurements get sent from the course to a Shotlink truck on site, and they are relayed to pgatour.com and to the TV people, CBS, NBC, Golf Channel and international TV that might be on site. Those readings can be converted into graphics, like the ones that show where tee shots landed and then what the resulting score was on the hole, par, birdie or bogey. You know, those balls that are red, white or yellow on a graphic.

So, could AI take over a golf tournament? Could AI create artificial golfers on a course that could cause the viewing audience to confuse them with what is really happening?

It's unlikely. It would be really hard to have it done on a telecast. Someone would

have to control an entire tournament's television feed, as well as computer modeling of the course and of many golfers in the tournament. Exact digital replicas of the course, the holes being played and the golfers on the course would be required.

Right now, that's just too complicated, even for the fastest computer chips. They'd collapse under the strain, put their little semiconductor feet in the air and give up the ghost. It would be a lot harder to create a golf tournament than to make that great clip of puppies in the snow, as cute as it was. It could be done, but why? It's so much work, and we have real people out there actually playing golf. It's not going to change the outcome of the real event. It's unlikely that the animation is good enough to fool avid golf fans.

However, when it comes to golf equipment, AI is definitely there in a big way. You can't get any closer to it than the name of a new driver, Paradym Ai Smoke, by Callaway. The company says it will give golfers 19 yards of shot shape correction. That thing has to be flying off the shelf!

The design was likely done by computers doing simulations of golf shots plus (most likely) real golfers hitting golf shots to figure out how to make the club face correct the ball flight of not-very-good golfers.

AI was used to design the Callaway Epic Flash five years ago, according to an article in Forbes. They used a standard club body and then asked a supercomputer to design the face of the club.

The supercomputer did 15,000 versions of the clubface until it found the one that would have optimum characteristics with the rest of the club and would give the fastest possible ball speed within the USGA limits at the time. The result was the "Flash Face" driver plus a matching set of fairway woods.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 62 ■

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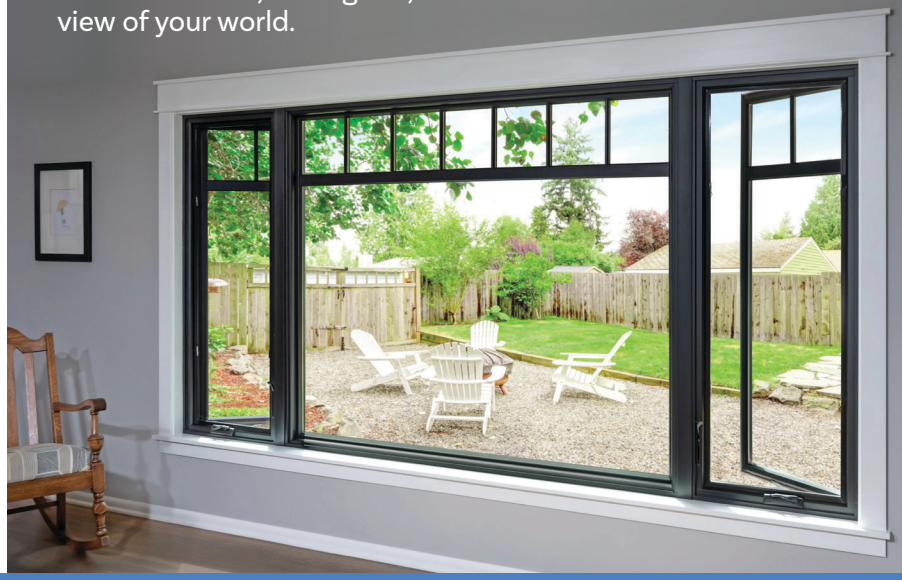

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2015: Rickie Fowler's Gutsy Finish at PLAYERS

There are few golfers more popular than Rickie Fowler. One reason is that he has always taken time for fans, particularly kids. He has a pleasant personality, and he'll give a smile and a wave. If he had victories in proportion to his fan base, he'd be ahead of everybody but Tiger Woods. People just love him.

That's what made THE PLAYERS in 2015 extra special for a lot of people, Fowler included. The funny thing is he was nowhere close to the lead when the final round began. He was so far down the list that his mother had already headed to the airport to go home.

He had finished in third after the second

CONTINUED ON PAGE 64 ■

PHOTO BY DON CHRISTIAN

■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 60

Callaway calculated that it would take 34 years for them to do all the calculations that the computer did to get the ideal solution, which became the Epic Flash.

And when it comes to artificial intelligence, the golf ball companies must use so much of it that it probably makes an IBM mainframe or the computer in the cloud smolder. (And remember, the "cloud" computer is still just a computer that you access via the internet instead of having it in your office or home.)

AI could be used to calculate the size, shape and number of the dimples and to count, measure and arrange the dimples and non-dimpled spots for optimum flight and stopping characteristics. Then, they could test the ball in imaginary flight for aerodynamics, and then test it with the golf machine, Iron Byron, named after Byron Nelson and then test it with actual people.

AI can calculate what happens to the ball in no wind, in sidewinds, crosswinds, downwind. It can test kinds and colors of paint on the balls and test what different kinds of plastic-like, silly putty, cookie-dough stuff that's inside the balls does to distance, straightness, ball flight and stopping ability.

Another area in golf that uses a ton of AI is golf course design.

Golf course architects use CAD systems — Computer Aided Design — to create and draw golf holes before dirt is moved to make them. There have been CAD systems in use for more than 50 years, and they've been in common use for between 35 and 40 in course design.

One important thing CAD can do in golf course design is to estimate how much dirt has to be moved to make a mound or dig out a bunker. The reason that's important is because moving a cubic yard of dirt has a dollar cost, so much per cubic yard. Just look at the mounds around the golf holes at the TPC Sawgrass course. CAD can calculate how many cubic yards are in a hill that has to be built or removed. Like that one that used to be between holes 6 and 7 on TPC Sawgrass that's now a lake. I wonder where that dirt went? Never mind how much it cost to take it down.

So, while it may be fun to make fake puppies and fake people, AI is actually a great advancement for anyone involved in predicting or simulating manufacturing processes or making new designs of just about anything from clothes to cars to houses to golf clubs and balls to spaceships.

What else can it do? You want to build a golf course on the moon? Or Mars? You're definitely going to need some AI for that. And it wouldn't hurt to have a backup slide rule, calculator, some extra batteries and a person who knows how to use all of them in case there's a blip in the solar power on your moonscape.

Like all computer-created entities, AI is only as good as the people who know how to use it, know how to make it work and know how to fix it or get the job done without it. Remember Apollo 13? When an important part failed, the people on the ground and the astronauts had to figure out how to make a work-around device out of items the astronauts had in their capsule to get them back home because they didn't have enough oxygen to finish the mission as planned.

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round, but in the third round, he fell out of contention.

In the final round, he started with a bogey and was then at 6-under par. Chris Kirk was leading, and he was at 10-under.

Sergio Garcia, who was two shots back when the final round started, was the only one making a charge. He had four birdies and just one bogey on the front nine. Garcia and Kevin Kisner sprinkled birdies and bogies through their rounds as did Ben Martin, and it looked for a while like one of them would be the winner.

Then Fowler found an extra gear. After making a bogey on the 10th, he cruised for a couple of holes and added a birdie at the 12th, but it was at the 15th that the fireworks started.

There, Fowler birdied. And so did Martin. At the 16th, everybody birdied but Fowler. He eagled it. That's when people desperately started calling his mother to tell her to turn the car around because there was a chance her son might win the thing.

Then, Fowler birdied the 17th with a

FILE PHOTO

miraculous tee shot to six feet, which he rolled in for a birdie. That gave him the lead. He extended it with a courageous tee shot of 331 yards on the 18th, followed by a second shot to 15 feet and yet another birdie. He was the outright leader.

He had been five shots back at the beginning of the day, and at the end of it, he was leading. He had played the last six holes birdie-par-birdie-eagle-birdie-birdie.

Unfortunately for him, there was about an hour left for the rest of the field to finish. He had to wait and watch them make birdies, hoping they would not better his score.

As it turned out, they didn't better it, but both Garcia and Kisner tied him at 12-under par. There would be a playoff.

Instead of sudden death, it was a cumulative score, then sudden death. All three went to the 17th where Kisner hit to 10 feet, and Fowler ended up six feet away. They both made birdies. Garcia hit to 45 feet and missed the putt. But this was cumulative, so they all when to the 18th hole and they all parred. Garcia was eliminated and Kisner and Fowler continued.

Fowler and Kisner went back to the 17th, the third time they would play it that day. Really, who wants to play that hole three times in a round? Nobody.

Kisner cleared the water and landed 12 feet away from the cup. Fowler, for reasons no one could fathom, ended up with a shot right of the pin, in the narrowest of spaces between the hole and the water. The crowd went nuts! Fowler acted like he planned it.

Kisner missed his birdie putt. Fowler, though, poured his in and won the biggest tournament of his career to date.

— K Bissell

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1999: David Duval on A Course Harder Than Any Major

FILE PHOTO

At the 1999 PLAYERS David Duval beat everybody. Tiger Woods, Ernie Els, Phil Mickelson, Nick Price, Colin Montgomerie, Davis Love III, Vijay Singh, Fred Couples and anybody who was somebody in golf at that time. It wasn't a garden variety victory, either. It was made amazingly difficult by a decision to make the course play harder. They got what they wished for. It was like an out-of-control NASCAR race. There were scoring wrecks everyplace. A lot of people love that kind of golf. To them it's exciting. If that's what you like, then the 1999 PLAYERS was probably the most exciting one of all.

"I have never seen the greens brown on Tuesdays," the late Bruce Lietzke quipped to Sports Illustrated describing the condition of the course.

The Associated Press reporter said at the time: "THE PLAYERS Championship is not a major. From the looks of things on Saturday, it may be even harder."

That day, Duval, the eventual winner, had five bogeys.

The Associated Press continued: "The third round had the whipping wind of a British Open, the nasty rough of a U.S. Open and the terrifying greens of the Masters."

"As far as the golf course goes, this is as tough as I've seen it," Duval said as he staggered away.

Others likely agreed.

Love had a triple bogey on the first hole and put two balls in the water at the 17th.

Els had a 42 on the back nine.

"It was like playing Augusta and the U.S. Open on the same day," Montgomerie quipped. "I like none of them, so if you put it together, it's worse."

"I don't know what they were thinking today," Woods said. "Certain holes were impossible to play. The greens were so fast, so burnt out." He had a 75.

"I hit 14 browns in regulation, so I didn't play that badly," the late Bruce Lietzke said to Sports Illustrated. "But they made the best players in the world look like knuckleheads."

During the final round, conditions stayed difficult. Only Duval was pleased about that.

"I wanted the greens to stay the way they were, because I knew they would reward quality shots and smart thinking. I feel like I am good at both," he said.

When he came to the 17th, he had to put his tee shot on the green to win the tournament. What did he do? He remembered

CONTINUED ON PAGE 70 ■

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SCAN TO LEARN MORE

2000: Hal Sutton "Be The Right Club To-DAY"

Hal Sutton had won THE PLAYERS in 1983, the same season he won the PGA. There, he defeated Jack Nicklaus. As a result, he was called the next Nicklaus for a while. It was a large burden to bear, pardon the pun. While he didn't win 18 majors and 70 tournaments as Nicklaus had done, Sutton had 14 PGA Tour victories and what could be called gumption. At the 2000 PLAYERS, he demonstrated that even he, a modest length hitter, at age 41, could stand up to the bulldozer that was Tiger Woods.

During the late stages of the third round, Sutton looked as though he might be ready to collapse under the strain. He had played 25 holes without a bogey. At the 17th hole, his 9-iron hit the island, but hopped into the water. He hit a lob wedge from the drop zone, and it spun a little too much and landed in the fringe. He ended up with a six. When the round was over, Sutton was only one ahead of Woods instead of four.

But Sutton was hard to scare.

FILE PHOTO

"I don't want to start anything, but he's still one down," Sutton said after the third round concluded. "He's just another guy who is going to put his right leg in his pants, then his left leg in his pants like I do. We'll tee it up on the first hole, and we're going to see who comes out on top."

Nobody in their right mind had ever challenged Tiger Woods that way. Whether on purpose or not, he had thrown down the golf gauntlet.

"I'll just go out and play my game," Woods said. "Hal might be thinking differently, but he needs to motivate himself."

On Sunday, a thunderstorm stopped play when the twosome were playing the 12th. Sutton had built a lead of three strokes.

Woods had, atypically, failed to birdie the par fives up to that point. In addition, he had made two bogeys.

"Well, obviously things aren't going as exactly the way I wanted to," Woods said about his shortened round. "But I am right there, and I got a pretty good chance of winning right now. I am only 3 back with six holes to go. But there is a lot of golf to be played."

Woods mentioned that a comeback was easier on TPC Sawgrass because so many

CONTINUED ON PAGE 70 ■

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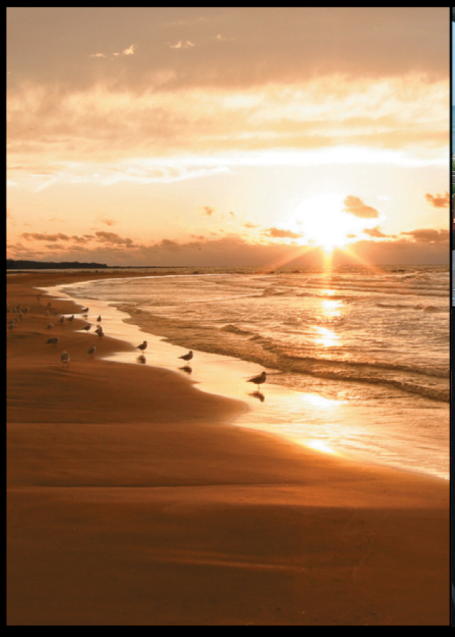

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what former PLAYERS champ Nick Price had done.

"The best golf shot I have ever seen played, and not — it wasn't a spectacular shot," Duval said. "I just mean the whole combination of routine and everything with the situation was when Nick Price won this tournament. He walked up there; grabbed his club; stood out over the ball, and hit it. Just never even gave himself — he never gave himself enough time to think about anything other than hitting it up there close."

A tournament highlight was the Fred Couples hole-in-one at the 17th, which meant he actually made a par on the hole since his first ball went in the water. So, hole-in-three?

With Duval's victory in THE PLAYERS, he took over the No. 1 ranking from Tiger Woods, which was a real achievement. He held it for 14 weeks until Woods got it back. Then, Duval retrieved it once more for a short time, and then it boomeranged back to Woods for about five years. But David Duval could say that when he was at the top of his game, he had taken the No. 1 spot away from the player who is either the best ever or the next best ever, depending on which measuring stick is used. Woods is tied for the most tournament victories on the PGA Tour. Jack Nicklaus has more major titles than anyone. Take your pick.

As a bonus for the Duval clan, Bob Duval, David's father, won on the PGA Tour Champions the same day.

— K Bissell

THE PLAYERS' 50TH ANNIVERSARY

things could happen.

"You can make birdies and other person make bogeys, or eagle on 16, there are a lot of different things; then you still got to play 17, and 18 is not a given par either," he added.

The rain continued for some time, and soon, a Monday finish was in the cards. Of course, everyone knows the outcome. But it was not decided for sure until the last hole.

Sutton had hit 17 of 18 fairways, the last one being the 18th. From there, he hit a 6-iron, which is probably impossible for any youngsters in the game to believe, but he did. He had 179 yards to the hole.

As the ball was in the air, Sutton uttered those now-famous words, "Be the right club to-DAY!" His ball was just 10 feet from the hole when it settled.

Woods had hit the green but with too much force. His ball rolled through and came to rest in a swale beyond the far-right corner of the putting surface.

In the end, Sutton defeated Woods by just one shot.

"To lead THE PLAYERS Championship from start to finish and to be able to play in the final round with Tiger Woods in the last group and beat him head-to-head, I can't not paint that dream any prettier," Sutton said after the victory.

His victory in 2000 was worth $1,080,000 versus his victory in 1983 which was worth $126,000.

— K Bissell

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WHO OR WHAT CAN PREDICT PLAYERS WINNER?

Only the Crystal Ball knows for sure...

by KATHY BISSELL

You'd think, with technology, it would be easier to tell you who will win THE PLAYERS. But no. According to our friend Google, anything searched with "prediction" is a medical problem or a weather forecast.

Worse yet, it's spewing up AI stuff when all we want is some guidance for golf.

I'm getting "predictive modeling" or "regression modeling," "equations that approximate interactions." Modeling? Interactions? Regression? Who are these people?

Sure, we could use a good weather forecast for the week of THE PLAYERS, but that other stuff is just word salad made up by somebody with a giant plate of synonyms.

But, Googs (only close friends call him that) did deliver something else really interesting: the most popular golfers by state, according to Vegas Insider. (If you look it up, you'll have to pardon their bad grammar from time to time. I guess AI hasn't passed advanced English yet.)

By popular, they mean most Google searched. Far and away, it's still Tiger Woods. And guess what? There's an outside chance Tiger will play at THE PLAYERS. The course is flat, so no problems walking. Of course, the problems are elsewhere. On the sides of the course and on the 4th green where something resembling part of the Himalayas is living. We won't even discuss the lake at 17 because, really, nobody wants to.

If he plays, can Tiger win? Well, never bet against him is all we can say. But he should stay close to somebody who moves slower than he does in case the alligator decides to get up on the bank and chase him. You know the line: You only have to be faster than the person with you when a gator comes to call.

But I digress. You'll never guess who the second most popular golfer is: Paige Spiranac. I don't have to tell you why. But she's not in the PLAYERS field. Many people probably wish she were.

After those two, it's Rory McIlroy, Rickie Fowler, Tony Finau, Keegan Bradley and Tom Hoge. Of course, these were done by state, and Tony's big in Utah, while Hoge — who shot a 62 in the third round of THE PLAYERS last year — is popular in North Dakota, and Keegan is top gun in Vermont. Rory is third — sorry Rory — after Paige. But like Tiger, he is popular in a lot of places.

While Vegas Insiders had picks for the Masters, the PGA, the U.S. Open and the British Open, nothing for THE PLAYERS. Hrummph! to that.

One gambling site included a couple of the guys who have gone to the dark side (LIV), as if they would be allowed to play at the PGA Tour's major!

And remember, as the line goes in Caddyshack, "Gambling is illegal at Bushwood …" But it's not illegal in Florida anymore. If you are inclined to bet on THE PLAYERS, you can do it legally at the Hard Rock Casino that's owned by the Seminole Tribe. The PGA Tour also has several "Official" betting partners, so take your pick.

I'm only a participant in one bit of betting lunacy called The Stupid Pool, which is a really, really stupid football pool run by a golf writer pal who used to cover some football a gazillion years ago. I almost never win anything in it, and yet I continue to torture myself by finding out how stupid I am at guessing who's going to win at football.

For me, when it comes to finding out who will win anything, there's only one source to trust. I went to find the cracked Crystal Ball,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 76 ■

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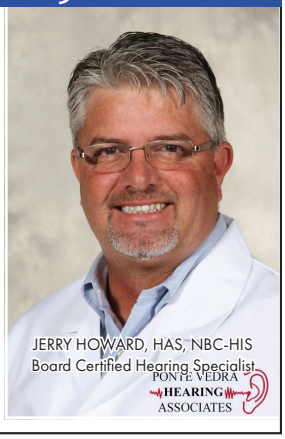

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■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 72

which has been hibernating under a fuzzy comforter in the coat closet since hurricane season ended. Since we almost never need coats here, it's a perfect place to sleep.

After the long nap, it was kind of a dull gray color, like that AI Smoke driver that Callaway has. I took it out gingerly. You have to be careful with something that predicts stuff. Also, remember, it has that crack down one side from when it did a back flip with two twists after Rickie won THE PLAYERS.

I brushed it off and pulled out an orange drink and took a sip and let it watch the carbonation. Surely you remember orange is its favorite color because it likes Rickie Fowler so much.

I saw a momentary glow, and the two of us went to the living room and turned on golf. We watched the WM Phoenix Open and the Ball hummed a little over Scottie Scheffler and Jordan Spieth. Texas has that burnt orange color after all. The Ball was coming to life. I thought surely with Scottie as defending champ the Ball would a least give me a pirouette. It was thrilled when he won last year.

However, the Ball turned its attention to Keith Mitchell who it remembered from last season. It would really like to know who supplies his sweaters, which are supposedly cashmere, if you can believe the announcers.

Well, the Ball and I both thought the weather in Phoenix was awful. Although it can be 50s and rainy here, no one has even mentioned hail during the 50 years of the tournament. Wind, yes. Rain, yes. Hail, no. The Ball asked if Keith had any orange sweaters. I said I didn't know. It pouted, like what good are you? I didn't tell it many people have wondered that, yet here I am, so there.

Then it caught a glimpse of Sahith Theegala and went nuts. Sahith was apparently born in Orange, California. The school colors at Pepperdine where he went to college are Orange and Blue. It's possible that Sahith may overtake Rickie as far as the Ball is concerned. Jury's out for now. That would be an unbelievable change of heart for the Ball. It's probably a momentary dalliance. The thing is a little flighty, but do not tell it I said that.

Of course, that orange fetish the Ball has also brings in Florida golfers, like Billy Horschel. The Ball likes Billy's go-getter attitude and was really happy for him when he won the Tour Championship. The Ball would like to see him win THE PLAYERS, that is if Rickie can't.

Wyndham Clark showed everybody a thing or two last summer when he beat Rickie and Rory at LA CC in the US Open. The Ball was so excited about Rickie's play, it didn't know which way to roll or if it should hop instead. But of course, Wyndham overpowered everybody, which is hard to do when you are also up against Rory McIlroy. Wyndham also won recently at Pebble Beach, reinvented this year as a Signature event, although rain-shortened.

Even the guy who finished second at Pebble, Ludvig Aberg, is a gamer. His last name is said O-berg. Don't ask. (The best is can do is a grandmother whose last name was Ludwig, but her family was mostly German and a titch Irish, so I guess they'd say the w like it was a v. Basically, the kid has two last names.)

Aberg is from Sweden by way of Texas Tech, and he already won an event in Europe over the summer and then played the PGA Tour in the fall because of PGA Tour University program. He won the last PGA

CONTINUED ON PAGE 78 ■

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■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 76

Tour event of the year, the RSM Classic. Some guys go two or three or four or more years without a victory.

Whether the Ball likes him or not, the Ball's owner definitely thinks the kid has a chance. Anybody who wins two pro events in less than six months on two different tours after finishing college, you can't turn your back on that. And guess what Texas Tech colors are? They look like Tiger colors: red and black. Aberg, one to watch!

The Ball, though, has another favorite. Well, not above Rickie, but a contender. You won't believe his name: Cristobal Del Solar. Cristobal (really, the Ball couldn't resist!) is 30 years old and is from Chile. He's won four times on PGA Tour Latinoamérica. Not only that. He recently shot a 57 for 18 holes. Fifty flipping seven! That happened at Country Club de Bogota-Pacos, a par-70 of 6,254 yards. They were playing at nearly 9,000 feet. What that means is the golf ball goes more than 10% farther, distance-wise, due to the altitude. (Actually, that 10% was for just one mile up. Who knows what it does 9,000 feet up, 20%?) We don't know if Cristobal will be in THE PLAYERS field, but the Ball is putting in a good word. Who am I to argue?

Now I'm getting down to serious conversations with the Ball on who is a likely winner. It's hemming and hawing. It likes Viktor Hovland. (Naturally, another Rickie Fowler, Oklahoma State, orange guy.) Viktor had a good chance a couple of times at THE PLAYERS, even in bad weather. The Ball winked at me. Yes, it definitely likes Viktor, if Rickie doesn't win, that is.

Even though it doesn't like UCLA, it likes Patrick Cantlay because he's nearly unflappable. You've got to be that way to play four good rounds at TPC Sawgrass. The Ball isn't stupid after all. In the final round at Genesis, Cantlay apparently had a temperature and some kind of illness — probably that same thing that everybody had between December and the end of February. Even so, Cantlay didn't miss winning by much.

The Ball kind of rocked back and forth a couple times and said there's no place like Homa. So, we should take that to mean Max Homa is in its sights. While Homa had a good finish last year, it wasn't quite enough to overtake Scottie Scheffler. Really, nothing was. He was Scottie The Dominator at THE PLAYERS in 2023.

Do you like gold? The Ball does when it's Olympic gold, like Xander Schauffele's medal. (The Ball is still jealous is what it is.) It does like Xander's fun attitude and his golf game. The Ball thinks he could win THE PLAYERS. Xander would need to be tough, which he can be. He won the Tour Championship in his first year as a pro, no easy feat. He has won on different continents. On different grasses. His scoring average is low-ish. He's just versatile.

The Ball definitely looks revived at this point, so I'm going to press my luck and demand a name.

How about Brian Harmon? I asked it. Collin Morikawa? Cameron Young? Adam Scott? That Austrian who lives in Georgia, Sepp Straka?

It's spinning but not giving me anything yet.

The other gold medal winner, Justin Rose? Tom Kim? Kurt Kitayama?

Would you look at that. Nick Taylor just won the WM Phoenix Open in a playoff and the Ball is bouncing up and down like a 2-year-old.

That's it. The Ball says so. Nick Taylor for THE PLAYERS! Even if his color is Canadian red.

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