

The Final Ford Senior Players Championship

By John Wukovits

This year's edition of the Ford Senior Players Championship—the final in a Michigan run that started in 1990—opened on Thursday, July 13, 2006 with a burst of birdies and low scores before limping to the bogey-marked finale on Sunday, July 16. It may not have been the most memorable tournament in the long stretch in Dearborn, Michigan, but it offered glimpses why the Champions Tour provides galleries with amazing artistry from veteran players.

Tournament play started on Thursday with a popular veteran and an unheralded performer tied for the lead. Fuzzy Zoeller, always a fan favorite with his quick banter and stellar play, registered a seven-under par 65 behind eight birdies over the demanding TPC of Michigan course, a Jack Nicklaus designed layout in Dearborn.

“One thing you want to do on the Champions Tour is get out of the box,” explained Zoeller after completing his first round. “That’s one thing this year I haven’t been doing. I’ve always put myself kind of in a hole the first round. These guys out here like to shoot and shoot fast. Everybody has got a six-shooter and they’re all very quick on the trigger. It’s kind of nice to get out of the box and play under par.”

Journeyman Ron Streck, who warmed up for the tournament by putting siding on his garage the previous weekend after missing the cut at the Senior Open, matched Zoeller with his best golf of the year, a round that saw him record five straight birdies on the back nine.

“I like the golf course,” Streck said following his round. “I’m sorry we’re not going to play here anymore. This is only my second year to play here, but I like the golf course. I think there are just enough difficult shots to make the golf course go one way or the other as far as the scores.”

A stable of twenty-three talented golfers lurked within four shots of the lead, including Bruce Lietzke at 67, Jay Haas and Tom Kite at 68, and Dana Quigley, Tom Watson, and tour newcomer Fred Funk at 69.

Sweltering conditions that saw temperatures soar into the 90s took its toll on the field during the second round. Twenty-nine players stood within four shots of the lead, which moved only to eight-under par, one stroke better than posted on Thursday. Eight players ended the day tied for the lead, including Tom Watson and Gil Morgan.

“It’s like that every year here,”

said Tom Watson. “It just seems everyone’s between five and eight-under par after two rounds.” He added that he felt excited with the condition of his game. “That’s the best I’ve struck the ball since earlier in the year,” stated Watson, “so that’s a good sign. I just can’t wait to get out there again tomorrow to play.”

Joe Ozaki notched the most spectacular round of the tournament. After paring the first hole, he ran off a string of eight straight birdies—tying a tour record—to post an incredible eight-under 28 on the front nine. After paring the tenth hole, Ozaki birdied the eleventh, then stumbled a bit on the way in with a one-over 37. His 65, however, vaulted him into a tie for first place.

They were followed one shot back by Fuzzy Zoeller, who came in with an even-par round, two shots back by Loren Roberts, Jay Haas, and Tom Kite, and three shots by Fred Funk. Rain forced the suspension of round two with twenty players, including Ozaki, still on the course. Those twenty finished their rounds Saturday morning, before play commenced on the third round.

Spectators hoping for someone to break out of the pack during the third round were not disappointed.

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Loren Roberts needed only twenty-five putts in his eight-under par, bogey-free round of 64 to grab a two-shot lead over Lonnie Nielsen and a three-shot lead over Brad Bryant and tour workhorse Dana Quigley.

Loren Roberts attributed the work he has recently put in on his game for his great results. "I've been working at my game pretty hard for the last four months. I made a couple of adjustments, one in the golf swing and one in the putting stroke. Yesterday, about the last three or four holes, I hit some better shots and made some better putts."

venous fluids, but they could do little for the other golfers who watched their rounds crumble in a flurry of second-nine bogeys.

Third-round leader Loren Roberts increased his lead to five shots before losing an errant drive on the hazard at 11, which cost him a double bogey. A bogey at the 12th hole and a second double bogey, this time at the treacherous 14th hole, dropped him from the lead.

Jim Thorpe, who had lurked within a few shots of the lead all week, now saw a win within his grasp, but a bogey on 18 put him three shots behind Bobby Wadkins, a longtime player who had never

13-foot putt to avoid falling into a tie with Jim Thorpe. He made the clutch putt to complete a four-under 68 and take the tournament. "All I was thinking was what Lanny was saying out there," said Wadkins of his older brother, Lanny, busy in the CBS television booth.

Wadkins earned \$375,000 for his victory, plus a spot in next May's PGA Tour Players Championship.

Some fan favorites attended the final Michigan version of the Senior Players Championship. Three legends—Gary Player, Chi Chi Rodriguez, and Lee Trevino—

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Gil Morgan remained in the hunt with a one-under 71, placing him five shots off the pace, but Tom Watson all but shot himself out of the tournament with a 78. However, as play headed into Sunday's final round, 14 golfers were within six shots of the lead. A shootout in the grand tradition of tournaments past loomed.

The epic duel failed to materialize as one after another, leaders stumbled in the blistering heat that saw Gil Morgan walk the fairways with a wet towel draped around his head and Jim Colbert leave the course on the 13th hole.

Paramedics stabilized the 65-year-old by administering intra-

won on the regular PGA Tour. Consecutive birdies from the 11th to the 15th holes vaulted Wadkins over his struggling competitors and placed him in a comfortable spot to win for the first time.

Despite the three-stroke margin with one hole remaining, Wadkins almost squandered his good fortune. He hooked his drive into the hazard skirting the fairway's left side, then plunked his third short into a bunker guarding the green. A poor blast out of the bunker left him in heavy rough over the green, and had not a mediocre chip hit the pin at full speed, Wadkins might have landed back in the original sand bunker. With his lead evaporating, Wadkins had to drain the

flew in as a way of saying thanks to the southeastern Michigan golf fans who long made the tournament a special one.

The final edition produced mixed reaction from the players. Most hated to leave such an appealing locale, but understood that economics propels every industry, including their own.

"I'm sad to see golf leave the Detroit area," said defending champion Peter Jacobsen to the Heritage Newspaper Press & Guide. "It's a great sports city." On the other hand, Lee Trevino laid the reasons to money. "Once you start losing the gallery, it's time to go someplace else." **MG**