

For Seagulls players, it's unconditional love



It was a rarity last weekend at the Seagulls Championship on Cape Cod when Andy Drohen teed off: the weather was perfect. (VINCENT DeWITT/FOR THE GLOBE)

By Jim McCabe, Globe Staff | April 26, 2007

HYANNISPORT -- And on the 56th year, the sun shined, the warmth flowed down, and the Seagulls Fourball Championship finally had great weather . . .

Hey, hold that thought, "because we've had a few other nice days over the years," said Rick Johnson, the head professional at the Hyannisport Club, who could safely be called the caretaker of this tournament. Then, with a smile, he added: "But not many."

Certainly, no one last weekend at "the Port" was able to remember days quite like those that greeted participants in this annual spring pilgrimage. With brilliant sunshine, an endless blue sky, and temperatures well into the 70s, it had players talking -- to fellow competitors, to themselves. And that, in a way, was so typical of this tournament.

"Weather is about all we talk about in the days leading up to the Seagulls," said Johnson, "and it's all we talk about during it, too."

That held true again this year, but while sun block replaced ski gloves as a mandatory component, the favorable weather hardly diminished the flavor of the tournament. There is too much history, too much passion, too much uncontested loyalty to let two days of splendid weather ruin things. And, after all, hadn't there been vintage Seagulls weather just one week earlier -- when a nor'easter barreled into Cape Cod?

Seagulls participants, of course, played on.

"I went home after my match that day, settled onto my couch to watch the PGA tournament, only they called off the tournament [in South Carolina] for the day," said Ray Richard. "They had high wind. I said to myself, 'Hey, we had that -- plus rain and cold and sleet. We played.'"

The Seagulls has been postponed only once, a snowstorm pushing back the first round of match play a handful of Aprils ago, but Richard's sentiment is accepted as gospel by the golfers who treat this event as a rite of spring. Tee it up and play on, through snow and ice, if necessary.

It dates to 1952 and while the Seagulls championship plaque hanging in the Hyannisport clubhouse is dedicated to the memory of G. Winthrop Moore, the tournament's charm is dedicated to the unbreakable spirit of the amateur golfer, most notably those from Cape Cod.

"For them," said Johnson, "this is their Masters."

And their stories prove why.

Weather or not

The third hole at the Hyannisport Club measures 354 yards, but depending on how much you want to cut off of the dogleg left, the drive is a testing one over water and marsh. At the easiest spot, "it's what, 100 yards?" asked Kevin Carey. "No problem, right?"

Wrong, because that cold wind was howling that day when a Seagulls memory was etched forever with Carey. His playing competitors, the late Dick Stimets and Tom "Red" Martin, flushed drives that barely carried the hazard, and Carey's partner, Joe Walker, did likewise. Carey? A lefthander with dynamic power, he got all of his -- and blasted it 150 to 175 yards.

"Dick Stimets looked at me and said, 'Kevin, I never thought I would say this, but I can't play in this,' " said Carey, who couldn't believe what he was hearing. Stimets had a relentless spirit, a year-round Cape guy who thrived when conditions were nastiest, so for him to wave the white towel toward Mother Nature was telling.

They walked in as a foursome ("Dick's face was a color of purple I'd never seen before," said Johnson, laughing), which speaks volumes about what is at the heart of this tournament.

"It's playing alongside a friend," said Jim Horvath, who teamed with Carter Fasick to capture the 2000 Seagulls. "That's the flavor of it, because what helps you get past the elements is having a friend beside you." Like a long line of people within Massachusetts golf circles, Martin considered Stimets the quintessential gentleman golfer and he terms those opportunities to be a Seagulls teammate "a real privilege." Even on a day when drives barely traveled 100 yards.

"Oh, it's a struggle most days, but there's nothing like that tournament," said Martin, and you don't have to go far to find someone who agrees. Take Dave Satterfield of Framingham, for example. More than 40 years ago he got an invitation, and he's been back each spring since.

"It's my favorite, without doubt," said Satterfield, who has played in snow, ice, hail, ferocious wind, and bitter cold. Nothing has deterred him and in that fashion, he's got great company.

"The weather gets so bad, it's easy to say this isn't worth it," said Fordie Pitts, who concedes he's mumbled that to himself several times. But guess what? Until a cranky back sidelined him, the 76-year-old amateur icon was ready to tee it up again this year, no matter that so many memories are of the frozen variety.

Johnson, who has run half of the 56 tournaments, will tell you it's a labor of love and what impresses him is the passion the golfers exhibit.

Starting with a field of 112 teams, "we somehow get 224 golfers around on that first day [of qualifying], but we never have had guys not show up, even with all the horrible weather we've had," said Johnson.

Every team gets placed into a flight -- the top 16 in qualifying make the Championship Flight, the next 16 get placed in the First Flight. Onward it goes until 16 teams are in each of the seven flights. The fact that it usually takes an even-par 71 to get into the Championship flight demonstrates how superb the competition has become, to the point that it's hardly unusual for former Championship Flight winners to tumble down into first, second, and even third flights.

"And it's pure scratch golf, no strokes involved," said Johnson, who has come to know the Seagulls entrants and greets each team on the first tee.

"He makes everyone feel comfortable and the club is so gracious to all of us," said Horvath, who missed this year's tournament for the first time in 26 years. Fasick, his partner, couldn't clear the two weekends (April 14-15 and 21-22), and while Horvath had plenty of time to secure another teammate, he didn't want to. "Carter and I are a team, that's what this is all about," said Horvath. "So, we missed this year. I told him we'll be back next year."

Involve and evolve

When all of this started in 1952, no one could have seen what the Seagulls would develop into. So says Bruce Besse, a Hyannisport member for more than 60 years and a competitor in the first Seagulls.

So, how different was it 55 years ago?

"They had 1 1/2 flights and I ended up winning the other flight. We beat Bill Barse [who would later become the head pro at Hyannisport] in extra holes and guess who his partner was? His wife," said Besse, laughing. "The first dozen or so years, they played it with handicaps."

There was also a year, said Besse, when teams off the Cape were allowed in, but that didn't go over well, so a hard and fast rule was drafted that remains a key ingredient to this day: One member of the team has to either live on the Cape or claim membership to a Cape Cod golf club. Participants say this adds to the experience, because you could have the

town exterminator playing alongside a plumber against a couple of CEOs, their lifestyles so different, but their love of golf so similar.

"It's a very, very special event for a lot of reasons, but mostly because it's a melting pot," said Johnson. "Let's face it. Cape Cod is a golf community and the Cape golfer is such a huge part of this tournament." Although the passion for the tournament has always run deep, Besse is thrilled at how far the competition has come. There were good players in his day, and through the years the champions have included Sandy Dowling, Bob St. Thomas, Danny Hostetter, Tim Harney, Fran Quinn Jr., and Ollie Hallet, who won three times with three different partners. But Besse notes how deep the talent is now.

"I'm constantly amazed how these guys can shoot 6- and 7-under in the type of weather they often have to play in," Besse said.

Given the best Seagulls weather ever, this year's gathering may have produced the best Seagulls tournament ever. Anyone witnessing Saturday's quarterfinals and Sunday's semifinals and final would agree.

"I have never been involved in matches like the three I was in last weekend," said Mike Boden, who teamed with Joe Keller to successfully defend their title. They trailed in their quarterfinal match, only to win in extra holes. They trailed in their semifinal match, only to win in extra holes. Then they were 1 down at the 18th against the most successful Seagulls team ever, Carey and Walker.

A fifth victory seemed inevitable, for Walker was all but guaranteed a par and Carey had a birdie putt inside 10 feet. Keller had driven poorly and Boden hit his approach long and right of the green. "The toughest shot in the state," said Besse, who was monitoring the proceedings. He knew Boden was pitching onto a green that ran away from him, a green quicker than quick.

An imposing shot? Boden agreed, but, "I only had one choice, to try and hole it, because [par] wasn't going to do us any good."

So Boden pulled the flagstick, picked out a spot on the green just over the bunker, and attempted a difficult flop shot. Somehow, he pulled it off, too, the ball landing softly as Boden watched the ball disappear into the cup.

"I'd never be able to do that again," said Boden, whose heart was still racing when he watched Carey miss his birdie try, sending the match to the 19th hole, the par-4 first. It was there Keller became the first seven-time Seagulls champion, his titles spread out across 20 years and three partners, but it will be off to the back of the 18th green where people will recount that time in 2007, when an impossible Seagulls shot was matched only by improbable Seagulls weather.

"It's the magic of Hyannisport," said Horvath. ■