

Park Ridge, Illinois, October 5, 2017

By Dennis LaLiberty



## **JOHNSON'S EARLY BIRDIES GET THE TROPHY AT THE 2017 CHAMPION OF CHAMPIONS TOURNAMENT**

Breaking fast out of the gate with birdies on the first four holes, and a near miss at #5, Blake Johnson of the Glen View Club posted a two under par 68 to win the 2017 *Champion of Champions* tournament by two strokes over five runners up. Played at Park Ridge Country Club, the tournament's home course since 1998, the event featured 55 players, most of them champions from private clubs in the six county metro area, including three winners from previous years, plus newly invited this year, champions from selected public courses. This year's October 5<sup>th</sup> date marks the first time the event has been played in October after many years in late September.

In horse racing a fast starter is said to show "good early foot," and that is precisely what Johnson did with all birdies through the first four holes--almost five but for a putt at #5 which spun out. Unlike many early leaders, though, he also remained strong in the backstretch, recording pars over Park Ridge's "last mile," consisting of the long 459 yard, 4 par #15, the dogleg 419 yd. 4 par #16, the 3 par #17 playing at over 200 yards, and the double dog leg #18 playing at 440 yards with its traditional upper right flag placement, which promotes flirting with the tree-lined left side of the fairway on the tee shot or, if the right side is favored from the tee, requiring a precise approach shot to avoid the huge right hand sand bunker. Johnson did stumble briefly after the turn, giving back two strokes with bogies at two of the 3 par holes on the back nine, #12, playing at 165 yards over water to a steeply sloped green, and #14, playing at its maximum yardage of 183 yards. But after that it was steady going over the last four holes. Blake Johnson was off early in the second group, so his patience was tested not only on the course, but also as leader in the clubhouse, until the final groups played in.

This year featured an unusually high number of second place ties, five players at even par 70. There were many early challenges to Johnson's lead, but typically the



contenders' momentum was lost over Park Ridge's "last mile": Brian Hickey of Edgewood Valley CC carded four birdies, but also four offsetting bogies, including those on #'s 15 and 16, to tally his even par total. Joe White of Bonnie Brook GC birdied #'s 1 and 12, but got derailed with bogies at #'s 16 and 17. Patrick Mudd of Innsbrook CC shot his 70 consistent with the card's 36/34 par, but with big swings in between,

including five birdies, three bogies, and one unfortunate double at #8. Dave Feder of Conway Farms Golf Club likewise recorded a 36/34 with three each birdies and bogies, two of the latter coming on #'s 15 and 17. Andrew Vitt of Exmoor CC reached his par 70 in steady fashion, with sixteen pars, a birdie at #7 and bogey at #13, but no fireworks after that.

Blake Johnson played his college golf at Rice University in Houston, TX. Now, although he's a member at the nearby Glen View Club, located in the Village of Golf, IL (named for the conductor's call of "Golf" for the stop on the commuter train line which ran near the course), Johnson is no stranger to Park Ridge. He's played in this tournament seven times previously, but claims he never played that well. While true that he never shot under par, his last two scores of 74 in 2014 (T-4<sup>th</sup>) and 75 in 2016 (T-9<sup>th</sup>), for example, were certainly respectable. Moreover, he has long-time family ties to Park Ridge. His great-grandfather, Tom Johnson, was a Park Ridge resident and PRCC member back in the 1930's, and Blake remembers visiting his great-grandmother, who passed away at the age of 98 and was known by the children as "granny who lives by the airport" [presumably *O'Hare International*].



Interesting, too, while the Glen View Club had not fielded a Champion of Champions winner in recent years, one of only two five-time winners of the event played out of the Glen View Club: George Victor, winner in 1950, 54, 55, 57, and 62. This sets a high bar for Blake Johnson, but it's not outside his reach, considering his relatively young age, excellent all-around game, even keel demeanor, and competitive spirit.

Despite dire forecasts of rain, the day proved absolutely perfect for golf: blue skies, bright sunshine, trees just beginning to turn autumn colors, temperatures in the mid 60's-low 70's (from the first tee-off until the final putt on #18), and just a whisper of wind. The competitors acknowledged the course to be in excellent shape, a great

tribute to Greens Superintendent Joel Purpur and his crew, especially considering September's extremely dry conditions and work underway to install a complete new irrigation system. The trademark Park Ridge greens were in immaculate condition, rolling fast and true, "as," in the words of one competitor, "they always are here." All other aspects of the event went off smoothly, including registration, the on-course score updating, and the work of the golf professional and food and beverage staffs.



Chicagoland's *Champion of Champions* invitational golf tournament for men was first played in 1933 and was held annually at various clubs until 1984. Park Ridge CC reinstated the tournament in 1998 and has hosted it annually ever since, with the exception of 2001 when the course was closed for remodeling. This year marks the first in which the event has an official new

name, *The Richard E. Peterson Champion of Champions*, honoring Park Ridge Country Club member Rich Peterson, who was the driving force in reviving the tournament and giving it a permanent home. The traveling trophy to be displayed at the winner's home club, now to be known as the "*Peterson Trophy*," was donated by the Western Golf Association (WGA).

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