

## THE CHAMPION OF CHAMPIONS: HOW PARK RIDGE COUNTRY CLUB REVIVED A SLEEPING BEAUTY

*2019 marked the twenty-third anniversary of the successful revival of a popular local golf tournament that had been put on the shelf in 1984.*

*By Dennis LaLiberty*



October 8, 2020 witnessed the victory of Morris Country Club's Patrick Keegan in another successful Champion of Champions tournament hosted for the twenty-third consecutive year by Park Ridge Country Club. Keegan's one over par 71 was one slim stroke ahead of three determined challengers, earning him the championship trophy over a field of seventy-two competitors from golf clubs in the metropolitan Chicago area.

The Champion of Champions is a one-day, eighteen-hole, stroke play tournament, with invitations going to the current year champions of all private country clubs in the area along with past winners, who are given a ten-year exemption. Beginning in 2017, invitations were also extended to the champions of select public courses which had organized championship competition and winners of the current year's CDGA Mid-Am and Senior Am events. The concept is simple and not unlike the questions so often posed by both children and adults concerning all sports: "Who is the best [Fill in the blank]: baseball player, basketball player, football player, golfer] in the neighborhood?" In the case of golf, the "neighborhood" is the greater metropolitan Chicago area and the method to determine the answer is the Champion of Champions.

Originally held in 1933, the event was played annually through 1967, suspended between 1968 and 1973, revived and played through 1984, when it was again suspended. The tournament was played at various clubs over that time span, including Park Ridge CC from 1942 through 1955, more times than at any other single club. The Chicago District Golf Association (CDGA) was the tournament sponsor but their organizational resources were limited and their focus on other tournaments and events made it impossible for them to provide the necessary organizational framework and boots on the ground to ensure the tournament's viability. CDGA needed committed local partners to succeed and, when interest among the area's private clubs waned in the early 1980's, the tournament was shelved after it was played in 1984.

Were it not for two individuals from Park Ridge CC, Rich Peterson and John Larson, the tournament would have remained dormant. Larson had won the annual Park Ridge CC championship in 1984 and was thus invited to play in the Champion of Champions tournament, held that year at the Chicago Golf Club in Wheaton. He again won the club championship in 1986 and was looking forward to an invitation to the Champion of Champions so he could once again test his skill against the other top golfers. By late August of that year, with no invitation in his mailbox, Larson contacted the CDGA only to learn that the tournament was no longer being played. And that was that. Or maybe not.



**L-R: Rich Peterson, John Larson**

The idea of having local champs pit their skills against their peers stuck with John Larson. He recalls, “After I won the Park Ridge championship twice more, in 1990 and 1991, the fact that there was no longer a chance to play in this fun and challenging event was like a pebble in my shoe--I couldn’t stop thinking about it.” And that thought kept nagging Larson over the next few years. Then, as he was commiserating with fellow club

member Rich Peterson about the demise of the Champion of Champions, John had an inspiration. As Rich put it, “He wondered if we could revive this event and whether our club members and staff would be willing to provide the enthusiastic support necessary to make it a success.” As Larson and Peterson brainstormed the idea, they concluded that holding the tournament would have to be a sustaining operation. Just hosting it for one year, then seeing it moved to another venue, wouldn’t allow the organizational framework to be developed and maintained, nor would the organizers be able to stay ahead of the learning curve if new individuals at different venues were to be responsible for its operation each ensuing year. In other words, the Champion of Champions needed a permanent home, and their intent was to make that home Park Ridge Country Club.

In 1997 Rich Peterson, who had served on the Club's Board in the late 1980's and early 1990's, and later as President in 2002-2003, felt the Club would enthusiastically endorse such a project, so he and John Larson made a presentation to the Board with their proposal for Park Ridge CC to host a renewed Champion of Champions tournament. After careful analysis, including discussions with the Club’s Grounds and Greens Committee and staff, as well as the general manager, golf professional and facilities staffs, the decision was made to proceed.

As one of twenty-five founding members of the CDGA, Park Ridge CC was an excellent choice in many respects. It had been host to the Women’s PGA Western Open in 1944, a Women’s U.S. Open Qualifier in 1988, a Senior Men’s U.S. Open Qualifier in 1993, and a previous multi-year host of the Champion of Champions, the most of any course in the 1940’s through the 1950’s. Most importantly, both the membership and staff have enthusiastically embraced the idea of permanently hosting the tournament, with over 50 members annually volunteering to fill all the roles necessary for a successful event.

It also helped that the CDGA gave its blessing and full, ongoing cooperation to Rich Peterson, John Larson, and Park Ridge CC in their undertaking to become the tournament's permanent operators. Further, thanks in part to Peterson's long-time involvement with the Western Golf Association, where he later served as Chairman and continues as a Trustee of the Evans Scholars Foundation, the WGA also joined in support of the event.



Rich Peterson recalls, "Support from the WGA was especially valuable since it made it possible for us to give the event a touch of formality that sets it apart from other local amateur tournaments. They supplied Starter and Scoring Tents along with field radios on tournament day, and generously donated the traveling trophy, which is presented to the tournament winner for display at his home club during the year after his victory." He also points out that the CDGA's involvement has been especially important, given their reach and recognition within the area's golf community, in aspects such as their communications assistance and media coverage.



**Leader Board Operators,  
L-R: Jenny Perry, Linda Buggy**

But, Peterson goes on, "While there is a little bit of formality associated with the tournament, it's also like 'Old Home Week' in some respects. Many of the competitors are familiar with each other from play in other events, for example, a number of golf leagues like our own 'North Shore League,' which features local area clubs in weekly competition. Additionally, many of the participants are repeat champions, so they've played against each other in our event

previously. And maybe the most important aspect of the tournament's cordial and relaxed atmosphere are the friendships which have developed between the competitors and the Park Ridge club staff and the many repeat volunteers who have worked with the players in one way or another, the best example being the walking, or riding, scorers who accompany each group."

Yet one more boost to the tournament that was particularly important in its early days under Park Ridge CC sponsorship was the financial and marketing support provided by some



commercial sponsors. John Larson points out, “In 1999, our second year, when we were just getting things off the ground, we were fortunate that a few of our members were able to connect us with some generous sponsors: Dennis Hooker recruited Blue Cross/Blue Shield, Jerry Gust did the same with CDW, while Rich hooked us up with the Chicagoland Cadillac Dealers. Computer leasing giant Comdisco also provided significant support, thanks to Club member Jack Slevin, who was their CEO at that time.” Then in 2000 and 2001, the Cadillac dealers provided some very strong assistance, and finally, in 2002, Cadillac was joined by Chrysler in support of our event. The funds we received allowed us to purchase pin flags, trophies, caddie uniforms, and tee markers, plus they enabled us to publish tournament programs and finance video productions summarizing the tournament for later airing on local TV. After that, we were up and running and able to go forward on our own when local commercial sponsors began to direct their marketing efforts to other events and away from golf.”

The Park Ridge course itself has proven to be a players’ favorite. Thanks to the efforts of Superintendent Joel Purpur and his Grounds and Greens staff, the course is typically in immaculate shape, with the greens being singled out for praise by many competitors for their subtle difficulty and excellent conditioning. Likewise, the golf and facilities staffs along with member-volunteers work hard at making the players feel welcome--providing an engaging registration process, practice site availability, a tournament ambiance including formal starting procedures, member-scorers with each group, real time on-course leader boards, on-course qualified rules officials and formal scorecard signing procedures, and an excellent buffet luncheon for players, caddies, member, and guests.



**L-R: Mike Sharp, Bill Scharringhausen, Harold Arai, Dick Roch, Paul Benson**

While an initial impression of the PRCC course may suggest easy scoring due to its relatively short total yardage (6,578 yards from the back tees) and flat Midwestern terrain, the course plays to a par 70 and is more difficult than it might first appear. Insightful design by the club’s principal architect in its early years, William Langford, a significant rework by David Esler in 2001, and a major bunker reconfiguration and renovation project in 2020 (including all new sand), give the course both eye appeal and complexity that adds to its difficulty and which requires a thoughtful approach to play on many of its holes. Rich Peterson points out, “Going low is certainly possible, but it doesn’t happen without careful course management and the skill to make all types of shots. Our greens are perfectly conditioned and they roll true, but most are sloped, some steeply, and all have subtle breaks. Moreover, holes can be cut in locations that create challenges for the placement of tee shots or approaches, therefore requiring extra care on shots that might look easy at first glance. Sand bunkers, many of which are wide and deep, guard all the greens, and, along with the greenside swales on a few holes, they create some interesting predicaments when approach shots stray

even slightly. And while the course isn't overly long, the presence of old majestic trees lining most fairways, a few doglegs, some greens with narrow openings at the front or offset with respect to the line from the fairway, plus strategically situated fairway bunkers, add to the risk factor for players who think they can simply overpower the course."

Over the twenty-three years since Park Ridge has been the tournament host there has been some outstanding play, notable occurrences, and often intense competition. In 2020 the eventual winner, Patrick Keegan, spent a nervous 60 minutes in the clubhouse after recording his one over 71 while three competitors who teed off on the last four holes with a good chance to tie or even win each encountered complications resulting in a finish one stroke short of a tie and two from a victory. The tournament story over the years has featured some excellent golf as the following summaries will attest.

Mike Stone of Evanston Golf Club, the winner in 1998, the first year in which PRCC became the official host, needed to make one of the field's only two birdies on the difficult, double dogleg 440 yd. final hole to card his even par 70 and secure his one-stroke victory over runners up Mark Abate of Elgin CC and Randy Schwartz of Crystal Tree GC.



Mike Stone [Evanston Golf Club]

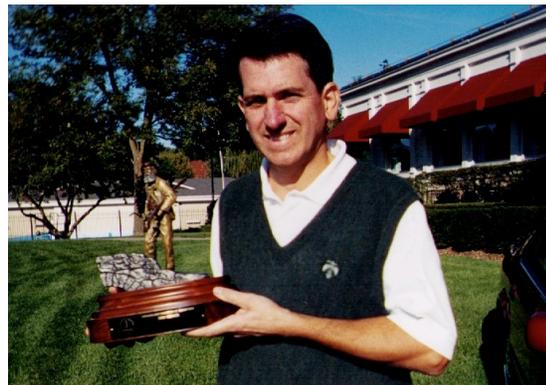


Jim Whitley [Geneva GC]

In 1999, Jim Whitley, the left-hander from Geneva GC, produced a one-over 71 on a cool, windy day to eke out a one-stroke victory over four other competitors, defending champion Mike Stone of Evanston GC, Dave Allard of Olympia Fields, Steve Daly of Chicago Golf, and Tom Studer of Joliet CC.

1999 also marked the inauguration of a follow-on event also played at Park Ridge CC, the Challenge of Champions. The winner of that year's Champion of Champions would meet the area winner of the Public Links Tournament of Champions in a 36-hole match play competition to be played the week following the Champion of Champions. Later, in 2002, an 18-hole women's match was added to the day, featuring the winner of the women's Champion of Champions (played at different private courses over the years) and the winner of the public course Tournament of Champions. The Challenge of Champions for both the men's and women's divisions were played annually through 2005 but then suspended when the Public Links Tournament was dropped from the CDGA schedule.

In 2000, Mike Mortell of Olympia Fields CC shot 68, the first sub-par round since PRCC became the tournament host, for a two-stroke victory over three others, Vic Postillion of Ruth Lake CC, Phil Kenny of North



Mike Mortell [Olympia Fields] 2000, 2001 Winner}

Shore CC, and Andy Gableman of Oak Park CC.

The Champion of Champions was moved for one year, 2001, while the Park Ridge course was undergoing renovation, but it was still operated under PRCC sponsorship. Mike Mortell won his second consecutive championship at Medinah's course #1 with a one-over par 72, one stroke ahead of three others, Jim Vaughn of Sunset Ridge, Larry Vaughn of White Eagle, and Craig McDonnell of Beverly CC.

Back at Park Ridge in 2002, the tournament witnessed its first playoff after five players finished eighteen tied at even par 70: Terry Werner, Briar Ridge CC; Brian Streeter, Calumet CC; Mike McLoone, Crystal Lake CC; Stan Kapka, Ridgemoor CC, and Don Gaspar, Glen Oak CC. McLoone had to withdraw to deal with a business crisis in Milwaukee, leaving the others to compete in a cumulative score, three hole playoff on Holes #10, 17, and 18. Kapka fell out of contention after the three designated holes while Werner, Streeter, and Gaspar remained tied and moved on to what was now a sudden death conclusion. On the first sudden death hole, the par 5 10<sup>th</sup>, Werner's one-putt birdie after emerging from a greenside bunker proved to be decisive for his hard-fought victory.



Terry Werner [Briar Ridge] 2002, 03, 07, and '16 winner

Terry Werner improved his 2002 score by two strokes for a two-under par 68, thus notching his back-to-back win in 2003. Leading by four strokes after finishing 14, Werner carded two consecutive bogies, while runner up Andy Gabelman of Oak Park CC edged to within one with a birdie on 16. But steady pars by Werner matched Gabelman's effort over the last two holes for Werner's one-stroke victory.



Noel Zimmerman [Flossmoor CC]

2004 saw the second playoff in the tournament since PRCC signed on as host as Noel Zimmerman of Flossmoor Country Club and Dan Vidimos of Innsbrook CC tied with even par 70 rounds. Zimmerman won the three-hole playoff with a par 4 to Vidimos' bogey 5 on the third playoff hole, the difficult double dogleg 18<sup>th</sup>.

Indicative of how competitive the Champion of Champions had become, 2005 saw yet another playoff. Mark Faulds of Olympia Fields CC and Vance Antoniou of Butler National CC tied in regulation with one-over par 71's. Tied once again after the three-hole cumulative score playoff, the competitors went to the par 5 10<sup>th</sup>, the fourth hole for what was now sudden death competition. Faulds' one-putt for birdie versus Antoniou's two-putt par earned him a victory, delayed but not denied.



Mark Faulds [Olympia Fields]



Mike McLoone [Crystal Lake]

Thanks to a birdie on the difficult par 4 16th, a par 3 on the 17th and an 18' downhill sliding putt for par on 18, Mike McLoone of Crystal Lake CC gained his 2006 victory with an even par 70, one stroke better than Steve Sawtell of Skokie CC.

Champions was marked as usual by his steady, workmanlike play: sixteen pars and just one each birdie and bogey.

Russ Fitton of Boulder Ridge CC carded a 68 to win the 2008 Champion of Champions. Fitton's two-under par score matched the record low score for the tournament since Park Ridge CC became the permanent host in 1998--and he needed it to win since the runner up, three-time winner Terry Werner, playing in the last group of the day, found himself at two under after 17 holes. But an uncharacteristic bogey at the difficult 18th proved to be Werner's undoing, and his final score of 69, while still under par, kept him one shot away from the winner's circle.



Russ Fitton [Boulder Ridge]



Craig McDonnell [Beverly] 2009, 2010 winner

2009 saw another sub-par round from the winner, this time a one-under 69 produced by Craig McDonnell of Beverly Country Club. After a rocky start with a bogey at 1, McDonnell finished the front nine at even par thanks to a birdie on 4. Two quick birdies at 10 and 11 gave him momentum and, despite one bogey at the long par 4 15th, steady play on the back nine earned him the victory by two strokes over two competitors, Terry Werner of Beverly Ridge



two players, Rick Cavanaugh of Biltmore CC and Rob Chapman of The Grove CC. Moriondo almost certainly would hold the distinction of being the competitor farthest from his birthplace since he was born in Buenos Aires and did not come to the U.S. until his college years. As a 13-year old, Moriondo first played his golf at the world-renowned Jockey Club in Argentina, a course designed by Alistair MacKenzie, who also designed Augusta National in the U.S. and Royal Troon in Scotland.

The fifth playoff in the eighteen years since Park Ridge CC began hosting the tournament resulted in Marty Hynes of Ridge CC winning the 2015 Champion of Champions. Hynes and Jason Chojnacki of Prestwick Country Club finished tied at one-under 69 after eighteen. The three-hole cumulative playoff saw Chojnacki going one-down to Hynes with a bogey after the first hole, the par 5 10th, then matching scores on the last two holes, thus giving Hynes a one stroke victory.



Marty Hynes [Ridge CC]



Terry Werner [Briar Ridge] winner in '02, '03, '07, and '16: Holder of tournament scoring record of 65 [2016]

2016 featured a new scoring record for the tournament as Terry Werner of Briar Ridge CC secured his fourth victory in the event with a sparkling 65, two strokes better than the previous tournament record. And Werner needed that 65 to eke out a one-stroke victory over runner up Kevin Koziol of Crystal Tree CC, who was actually threatening Park Ridge's new record low of 64, which had been set just two years before by PGA TOUR professional Fred Funk. But a near miss for birdie at 16, then bogey at 18, denied Koziol a tie for the course record as well as the opportunity to send the tournament into a playoff. Werner's 65 proved good enough to not only give him his fourth Champion of Champions victory but to also set the new record

low for the tournament. Contributing to the low scores was the enactment of a local rule allowing competitors to "Lift, Clean and Place." Daylong torrential rains on the eve of the tournament left the course playable, but exceedingly wet.

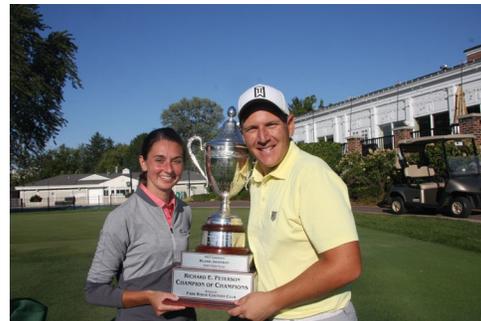


**18<sup>th</sup> Hole Scoring Tent**

Valley CC; Patrick Mudd, Innsbrook CC; Andrew Vitt, Exmoor CC; and Joe Whit, Bonnie Brook GC--the most runners-up ever in the history of the event. (Johnson had played in the event a number of times previously, both as the Glen View Club's champion and, even earlier, when he was a member of Exmoor CC.)

In 2017, Blake Johnson of Glen View Club, teeing off early with the second group, jumped out of the gate fast with birdies on the first four holes and a near miss on the fifth, grabbing a big early lead which held up sufficiently for him to win with a two-under par score of 68. Johnson stumbled a bit after the turn with bogies on 12 and 14, but steady play with pars over Park Ridge CC's difficult final four holes allowed him to finish strong and earn a two-stroke victory over five others: Dave Feder, Conway Farms GC; Brian Hickey, Edgewood

The winner in 2018, Ryan Cuitino of Morris Country Club, had never played the Park Ridge course, nor even been at Park Ridge Country Club previously, although as a youngster he lived in nearby Edison Park until the family moved to Minooka, Illinois, close to Morris, where he now lives. At the end of regulation 18 holes, Cuitino was tied with two other competitors at 2 over par, Kevin Vernick, Olympia Fields CC, and four-time champion, Terry Werner, Briar Ridge CC. The competitors entered a 3-hole cumulative score playoff, the sixth in the 22 years since Park Ridge became the tournament host. All three players made par on the first playoff hole (#10, par 5); on the next hole (#17, par 3), Vernick stumbled with bogie while Cuitino and Werner made par; Cuitino's steady play on the final playoff hole (#18, par 4) produced a safe par, while Werner was unable to save his par after hitting his second shot into a greenside bunker. Vernick's tee shot found the trees down the left side, thus requiring two more shots to make the green, which, along with two putts, resulted in his second bogie of the playoff. The result: A first-time victory for Ryan Cuitino. An interesting side note to the year's championship is that this was the first time when both the player and his caddy were club champions. Cuitino's caddy, Veronica, was the reigning Morris Country Club Women's Champion (and she also happened to be his wife).



**2018 Champion Ryan Cuitino and wife [caddy] Veronica**

2019 witnessed the second victory of Bob O'Link Golf Club's Ted Pecora, who won his first Champion of Champions trophy in 2012. Pecora entered the competition in 2019 coming off some recent competitive disappointments, failing to make the cut in the USGA Senior Amateur, played in August at Old Chatham GC in Durham, NC, and the Illinois State Amateur, played earlier in September at Westmoreland CC in Wilmette, IL. A conservative game plan to just go for "fairways and greens," (in Pecora's words) and his skill at iron play, which he thought would serve him well on Park Ridge's five 3-par holes, were the basic elements of his plan to contend. The four

birdies Pecora produced in the first 7 holes jump started his round and allowed him to apply his conservative game plan to the remainder of the round, with only two bogies marring a smooth string of pars, and the final result being a 2-under par 68, four strokes ahead of his nearest competitor, Jamie Young of The Club at Strawberry Creek, located in Kenosha, Wisconsin, who finished at 2-over 72, while five players tied for third place at 3-over par.



**2019 Champion Ted Pecora [Bob O'Link] on 18th Hole**

Patrick Keegan of Morris Country Club fashioned a steady one over par round to earn a slim but solid victory in 2020. There was plenty of competition as 72 golfers stepped up to the first tee, with three competitors finishing at two over par, just one stroke behind Keegan, who spent a nervous 60 minutes as leader in the clubhouse while his closest competitors were still out on the course.



**Patrick Keegan With the Tom Morris Trophy**

As so often happens, it was the Park Ridge course's "Last Mile," the four finishing holes, which proved decisive. The 18<sup>th</sup> hole took its toll on Keegan, who came to the tee at even par and left at one over after his third bogey in a round that featured birdies at 2 and 13, with the previous two bogies coming at 7 and 10. Brian Hickey of Edgewood Valley Country Club joined Brian Barrett of Royal Melbourne and the 2019 champion, Ted Pecora of Bob O'Link GC, in finishing one stroke behind at 2 over 72. Hickey, who had led most of the day and looked as if he might be the second lefthander to win since Park Ridge became the permanent host, played the last four holes at 4 over par, while Barrett bogied 15, then parred in. Pecora played the final four in regulation but was unable to overcome some miscues early in his round and just missed rolling in a lengthy putt for birdie on 18 which could have resulted in a tie and a three-hole aggregate score playoff.

2020 marked twenty-three years since Park Ridge CC became the home of the tournament and its permanent host. Over the years, the Club has supported the event enthusiastically and with increasing skill through experience and the help of many constituencies, notably over fifty hard working member-volunteers and many Club employees: the golf professionals led by Head Professional, Luke Hemelstrand; the Grounds and Greens staff, led by Superintendent Joel Purpur; and the Food and Beverage staff. Lots of credit, too, goes to the two whose germ of an idea in 1997 led to those subsequently successful years, Club member Rich



**L-R: Mike Roberts (Leader Board Central), Dennis LaLiberty (Media Relations)**

Peterson and former member John Larson (who still remains as one of the tournament's Co-Chairs). To honor Rich and his good work, in 2017 the Club elected to give the tournament a new official name,



L to R: Rick Strotman, Rich Peterson, John Larson, Jim Stonebridge

*The Richard E. Peterson Champion of Champions*, with the traveling trophy donated by the WGA henceforth becoming known as *The Peterson Trophy*. The experience gained by all in hosting the Champion of Champions also played an important part in Park Ridge CC's selection to be the venue for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary playing of the Western Junior Championship in June of 2017. Sponsored by the Western Golf Association (WGA), the tournament featured 156 of the world's best juniors (age 19 and younger) competing in four rounds of

stroke play for the *Milt Woodard Trophy*. The WGA staff, the players themselves, their families, and other spectators were one in their praise of the Club's handling all aspects of this prestigious tournament, including overall organization, volunteer participation, practice scheduling, and course preparation. As someone who had been in the forefront of the Champion of Champions tournament from its beginnings at Park Ridge CC and who had played key roles within the WGA, including Chairman and Trustee, Rich Peterson's involvement was one of the keys to success with the Western Junior Championship.

The Club is already planning for the twenty-fourth edition of the Champion of Champions in 2021. Member Jim Stonebridge has now joined Rich Peterson and John Larson as a Co-Chair and the tournament committee is rounded out with Rick Strotman, Mike Roberts, and Dennis LaLiberty each bringing their own specialty skills to overseeing the tournament's many aspects and organizing all its details. All Club members and staff look forward to many more years of outstanding golf and stimulating competition at the Champion of Champions, a tournament which has truly found itself a happy home at Park Ridge Country Club.