

ILLINOIS GOLFER THE OPENING 9

Monday,
May 10, 2021

Here come the Illini. Again.

1 They're as dependable as dandelions decorating your lawn after a spring rain. Illinois' men's golf team is always there when it matters, always climbing to the top of the conference, always a threat in the NCAA Championship.

This year, the first competition since the fall of 2019, is no different. Illinois rallied on the back nine a week ago to win the Big Ten title, it's sixth in succession and 11th in the last 12 playings, and gain a berth in the NCAA carnival.

Illinois is the No. 2 seed at the 12-team regional at Karsten Creek in Stillwater, Okla., right behind Oklahoma State, the host and Big 12 champion. (Northwestern is also there, seeded 11th.)

What's the secret to the success? Obviously, it starts with **Mike Small**, the head coach, who can recruit in-state and worldwide, and motivate, and teach, and provide the right word at the right moment, year after year after year.

Small has been at this for two decades now, so he knows when and how to push a button.

"The older you get, the more you appreciate the mental side of it, but when you're younger, 'Give me club, me hit ball,' type of thing. That's not the way it works," Small said last week. "You play with a perspective that's more valuable the older you get.

"The stuff I learned as a mini-tour player, it's better for them to know now. I've taken that approach. It would be easier to take myself out of the equation and say, 'Guys, go hit balls and play.' That's one way to coach. I've taken the stance that I'm going to do everything I can to give them as much information – to where it's not too much information – they can use to get better.

"What controls the whole engine is the mind."

Illinois is the team to beat in men's golf, but it seems to spur the squad on.



Danny Mattie / Illinois Athletics

ILLINI LEADER Adrien Dumont de Chassart, a junior, was co-Big Ten player of the year and one of three Illinois players on the conference's first team. No other school had more than one.

"This team's felt a bit of pressure and are doing a good job of handling it," Small said. "You're never going to play this game as perfectly as you want. When outside factors get in your head, whether personal or professional, they tend to stall you out a little bit.

"That (pressure) comes with the program. We asked for that a long time ago."

Small has cultivated a Belgian connection over the years, which led to notables **Thomas Pieters**, **Thomas Detry** and **Giovanni Tadiotto** arriving and thriving in Champaign. The latest is **Adrien Dumont de Chassart**, whose play this year earned him co-Big Ten

The Week Ahead

Illinois

CDGA

U.S. Open Local Qualifying,
Cantigny G, May 10

Illinois PGA

IPGA Match Play, Bull Valley,
May 10-13

National

PGA Tour

Byron Nelson Classic, CBS / Golf

LPGA

Williamsburg, May 20-23, Golf

Korn Ferry

Visit Knoxville Open

Champions

Mitsubishi Elec. Classic, Golf

International

European Tour

PGA Championship, CBS / ESPN

Tour Guide

How Illinois bred and connected
players fared last week:

Wells Fargo / PGA Tour

Kevin Streelman	T-26	\$ 53,275.91
D.A. Points	MC	-0-

Simmons Bank Open / KFT

Nick Hardy	T-25	\$ 4,686.86
Brad Hopfinger	T-44	\$ 2,790
Vince India	T-53	\$ 2,490
Luke Guthrie	MC	-0-
Derek Lamely	MC	-0-
Scott Langley	MC	-0-

The Tradition / Champions

Steve Stricker	2	\$220,000
Gary Hallberg	T-51	\$ 6,400

The Quote

"It's never easy to win out here."
– Rory McIlroy at Quail Hollow
after his first victory in two years.

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player of the year honors.

"That wasn't my main goal," he said.

"My main goal was to be consistent.

"It's always good to hear coach Small talk about what it takes to be mentally ready. Sometimes we tend to forget the little things that make you a good player.

"Being ready mentally is something I didn't really work on much, and it's really helped. That's one of the reasons I'm playing more consistently than I used to."

Small also has extra depth because of the pandemic. Effectly, this is the 2020 team a year late with Tadiotto and **Michael Feagles** staying. (Feagles and sophomore **Jerry Ji** joined Dumont de Chassart on the Big Ten first team.)

"The two seniors on this team came back when they were supposed to be done (thanks to the NCAA allowing all players an extra year in school because of the pandemic)," Small said. "That showed a commitment to the team. They wanted to come back and continue this thing, leave on top with a successful senior season."

Illinois' victory at Crooked Stick to win the Big Ten title wasn't guaranteed. They led by two entering the final round, won by one, but Iowa put up a stiff fight and led by five midway through the round.

"The last round didn't go according to plan at the start, but Plan B and Plan C came into play on eight and nine and 10, and they turned it around," Small said.

Turning points included Tadiotto's eagle on No. 11 as he played the last 14 holes in 5-under en route to a 1-under 71, Ji's three birdies in the last 10 holes, **Tommy Kuhl** scoring a brace of birdies at the turn and parring in, and Feagles' even-par 72 to take fifth individually.

How deep is Illinois? Dumont de Chassart's closing 74 didn't count toward the team total in the final round.

"I think the guys got hyped up because of Gio," Dumont de Chassart said.

Said Small, "Eight-under par the last 10 holes for our scoring guys, and 10-under over the last 10 holes for our entire team, in these conditions and on this golf course is pretty special."

Ji, who says he dreams of playing a perfect round of golf, is also a realist. Said he about the upcoming NAAs,

"It's about the last box on the scorecard."

2 Dumont de Chassart will be on the International squad for the Palmer Cup at Rich Harvest Farms in June.

"That was one of my goals at the beginning of the semester," he said. "It's going to be a great experience."

3 In the Illinois alumni department, **Steve Stricker** keeps at it. He nearly picked off his third senior major on Sunday, falling to Alex Cejka in a playoff for the Tradition title in Texas. The \$220,000 the 54-year-old received for second in defending his 2019 title – the Tradition was COVIDed out last year – will act as balm for the wound while he contemplates Ryder Cup pairings.

4 Two days of extensive telecasts of the Walker Cup from Seminole Golf Club proved two things: first, that Seminole, an exclusive outpost hugging the Atlantic in Juno Beach, Fla., made famous by Ben Hogan's presence each spring to tune up for the Masters, is every bit the tough course that partisans boast of, and that high-level amateur golf is fun to watch.

Pierceson Coody, last year's Western Amateur champion, went 2-0 in singles and dropped his alternate shot match with **John Pak** to **Mark Power** and **John Murphy**.

Cole Hammer, the Western Amateur winner in 2018, won both his singles matches and won and drew in his two alternate-shot matches, playing each day with Davis Thompson. And **Ricky Castillo**, who has threatened at the Western Am but not yet triumphed, went 4-0-0 for the U.S. in the 14-12 victory over Great Britain and Ireland.

The oddity of the Walker Cup was the illness, an apparent stomach bug, that hit many members of each team. It wasn't COVID and isn't believed to be food poisoning, but several players spent hours in the emergency room getting fluids via IV on Thursday and Friday.

5 Pro golf being all about money, it's not surprising that a rival golf series wants to grab players from the PGA Tour and European Tour, even after the revelation that the PGA Tour will shower

the most popular players with \$40 million extra at the end of this season.

The surprise is that two groups, not one, have the idea to upset the apple-cart. The oil-rich Saudis first backed the Premier Golf League, the idea of a group of sports executives and tycoons. That alliance faded, and now the Saudis have their own Super Golf League. Neither has players, TV deals or a schedule.

The PGL and the SGL each want to sign golf's stars to crazy-rich deals, but you would have to get most all of them – and only **Phil Mickelson** has gone so far as to say it's not the worst idea – or be SOL.

6 Remember last spring, when golf in Illinois was shut down from late March through the end of April? That's going on now in Ontario, where vaccination rates are slow. It's not that authorities think playing golf outside is somehow worse than walking or running outside, which is permitted. Rather, they don't want any outside fun until inside activities are allowed as well. Go figure.

7 Heritage Golf Group recently acquired 27-hole Boulder Ridge in Huntley. It's the company's first Illinois facility and 11th overall.

8 Golf on the radio goes back to the 1920s, but in these parts, it means chatter about the game, not play-by-play. That can be found on Sirius/XM.

The local chatterboxes in the Chicago area and southern Wisconsin:

The Scorecard, WSCR (670), Saturday, 6-8 a.m., with **Mark Esposito** and **Barry Cronin**.

Golfers on Golf, WCPT (820), Saturday, 4-5 p.m., with **Rory Spears** and pros **Ed Stevenson** and **Bill Berger**.

The Swing Doctor, WISN (1130) Milwaukee, Sunday, 2-3 p.m., with **Jim Frutchey**.

The Golf Effect, WTSO (1070) Madison, Wis., Monday, 6-7 p.m., with pro **Dennis Tiziani** and **Paul Braun**.

9 **Rory McIlroy** is back. Winning at Quail Hollow sets him up nicely for the PGA Championship at Kiawah Island in a fortnight. He just happened to win the PGA at Kiawah in 2012.