

ILLINOIS GOLFER

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The future of the game

Drive Chip & Putt showcases youth skills – and it started here

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The Grill Room by Tim Cronin

Kids these days ...

There was a time when golf courses, whether private or public, were often negligent in giving opportunities to children to play. They would get in the way of members or paying adults, they would be slow, they would tear up greens, and so yawn.

Eventually, that attitude changed. Private clubs have youth clinics where pros – often the head pro – teach the youngsters the etiquette of the game along with how to swing the club and so on. Public courses have youth rates, often in conjunction with a parent playing alongside.

Junior golf is booming, from organized operations like the Illinois Junior Golf Association to the First Tee to the PGA Jr. League, and just from all the practice – and the lessons – that kids are taking part in.

This weekend’s Drive Chip & Putt Championship is the most visible part of the junior golf iceberg. Sunday morning, parents will be awakened by their golf-loving kids early as if it’s Christmas morning, televisions will be switched to Golf Channel at 7 a.m. Central time, and a morning’s worth of kids driving, chipping and putting will be shown from Augusta National Golf Club.

The first one was played in 2014, and outsiders didn’t know quite what to make of it. Was it all too much, the setting and the pressure from being on TV? Apparently not, for the kids seems to thrive in the spotlight and enjoy the atmosphere. The inaugural telecast brought a

big surge in entries for the second year – qualifying is the summer and fall before – and it was clear the PGA of America, USGA and Augusta National, which jointly promote the DCP, had a hit on their hands.

In recent years, the PGA Jr. League finals – matches between groups from various parts of the country – have also garnered television exposure, but golf in a desert doesn’t quite compare to the unmatched aura that Augusta has. If you were 8 or 11 or 13 again, wouldn’t you want to get a chance to smack a ball or two on the big range, or chip to a target, or roll a couple of putts on the 18th green of that most familiar and most private setting? Of course you would, even if you didn’t know Hagen from Hogan – or even had heard of either.

So it will be on Sunday, with 10 players in each of four age groups of boys and girls – 80 in all, accompanied by parents in awe of what their kids are accomplishing and where they’re accomplishing it – will be vanned down Magnolia Lane for their big morning in the sun. (The sun does always shine at Augusta, no?)

Eight of those 80 will win their division and get an award, maybe from a former Masters winner. Bubba Watson, a kid at heart, always seems to turn up for a while.

Already, some girls from the early years have made the Augusta National Women’s Amateur field. Bet that some day, a boy will chase a green jacket. Too soon for these kids? Not at all.



ILLINOIS GOLFER COVER STORY

Stars in their eyes

Quintet of Chicago-area youngsters set for Sunday's Drive Chip & Putt Championship

BY TIM CRONIN
REPORTING FROM MEDINAH

Getting to the championship round of the Drive Chip & Putt competition is a little like the grind of the NCAA Tournament. It's an odyssey of playing and traveling, with local and sub-regional competitions before a regional that determines who goes to Augusta National the following spring.

To a youngster, it can be either wrenching or exhilarating. Or just another day hitting a golf ball. The five Chicago-area competitors who qualified last fall for this Sunday's final approached it in just about every way possible.

...

Take the steady approach of 12-year-old **Lisa Copeland**, who had advanced to Augusta in 2017, when she was a tyke of 7 and placed eighth in her bracket, with a sixth-place finish in driving. She sounded like the veteran she is when she said, "I look at Drive Chip & Putt as, it's only nine shots. It's not a big deal if you don't go. Just make it if you can. It's mostly just exciting."

Copeland was one of eight to advance last Sept. 11 at Medinah Country Club, where the Illinois PGA conducted the regional final. The Naperville girl led the 12-13 division, just as she won her local and sub-regional competitions.



Lisa Copeland • Girls 12-13

Do that, you can have a calm outlook.

"My dad would say you can hit a bad shot and it's OK," Copeland said after qualifying. "It's the bad decision-making or emotions. You want to be able to squash 'em down."

It's more than just Drive Chip & Putt for her. She's the youngest player in Illinois history to win a Girls Junior PGA qualifier.

Copeland, who plays out of Cog Hill – which

will host this year's Junior PGAs for both girls and boys – counts Elgin Country Club as her favorite course, and became a fan of Rory McIlroy because of how he interacted with fans during the 2019 BMW Championship at Medinah.

"I watched him almost be late to the next hole because he stopped and signed everyone's flags and hats," Copeland said.

She was the only one of the five local finalists who wasn't able to play hooky in early March for a media session that attracted a trio of print reporters and cameras from five local television outlets.

The other four arrived early, smiling and chatty.

...

Ledius Felipe barely made it out of the first round of qualifying, finishing third, but he won the sub-regional that preceded Medinah, then scored 138 points at Medinah to make the big jump to Augusta National on his fifth attempt.

The 11-year-old from Poplar Grove, which is nearer to Rockford than Chicago, has been aiming for this all his life. Mom has a photo of little Ledius swinging a club while almost 2 years old and decked out in a diaper. As you can imagine, Ledius rolls his eyes when that's displayed, admits to embarrassment that his mom Rosaline would share it, but filled in the backstory.



Ledius Felipe • Boys 10-11

“I was watching the Masters and just stood up and started swinging,” he said. “It was a stick.”

The next day, his parents bought him a plastic club, which he slept with, and the path to Augusta was set. He began playing when he was 6.

Now, Felipe is focused on the present, not the past.

“It will be very nervous and exciting,” Felipe said of the trip. “Golf is peaceful, relaxing in the fresh air.”

He’s a renaissance lad. He’s got the Old Course in St. Andrews on his bucket list. He plays chess and the piano along with basketball, soccer, cycling and swimming. Chopin is his favorite composer, but chess is closer to golf than a concerto.

“You have to make certain moves to win,”

Felipe said. “In this, keep it in the fairway. That’s how you get points. Hit it too hard, you can hit it out of bounds.”

Felipe also plays electronic golf on Playstation 4, using the Rory McIlroy player.

“I always use his character and always win,” Felipe said. “He has an amazing golf swing.”

No wonder, then, that he placed McIlroy in his dream foursome with Patrick Cantlay and Tiger Woods.

• • •

What were you doing when you were 7?

Eloise Fetzer of La Grange will be representing at Augusta National, which she calls her favorite course. A member of a competitive swim team, a Lego builder, and someone whose dream foursome includes Arnold Palmer, Tiger Woods and Lexi Thompson, Eloise will be among the youngest competitors in the Girls 7-9 Division.

Don’t let her relative youth fool you. Eloise is coming to play.

“Focus is your friend and if you believe it you’ll achieve it,” she says.

Who’s to argue with her after her showing in the regional final at Medinah, where she can hit a drive 156 yards already. The stylish left-hander chipped well, putted better and scored well enough in driving to win the division.

“I like chipping because it’s the best club in my bag,” Fetzer said. “My sand wedge and pitching wedge – because I say I can chip it and one-putt to get it up and down.”

She had played a little golf, then saw the Drive Chip & Putt finals on television and said, “I really wanna do this.” And on her first try, she’s on the way to Augusta National.

“I’ve always wanted to play in it,” she said –



Eloise Fetzer • Girls 7-9

always being since last April, which is a long time when you’re 7.

“I really started when I was 6 but I’ve had a club in my hand since I was 2,” she said. “My dad knew I wanted to do golf because one day we were at our course and I was hitting drives and drives and drives (with a plastic club and ball). I’d pick it up and hit another one. With putts, I’d pick it up and put it in the hole.”

Fetzer, thanks to her parents, including Kevin, who was on the Florida State team for two years as a walk-on and played in a U.S. Amateur, is getting playing experience when she can. The day before the March gathering at Medinah, she played in a U.S. Kids tournament near Miami, Fla., and scored 37 for nine holes.

With all her other activities, she seems un-



Tim Cronin / Illinois Golfer

THE LOWDOWN Drive Chip & Putt players and parents are welcomed to Medinah by the Illinois PGA's Palmer Moody.

likely to get overgolfed.

Justin Thomas isn't in her dream foursome, but is her favorite golfer, "because he has my same preshot routine."

Thompson because a favorite because she sent a congratulatory video.

"She's the pride and joy of La Grange Country Club," proud poppa Kevin said of his daughter. "Someone knew Lexi and had her send a short clip of congratulations."

•••

Clarendon Hills' **Michael Jorski** will compete in the Boys 12-13 Division. He's one of two repeaters, having gone four years ago, when he lived in Kansas. Since his appearance as an 8-year-old, this sixth-grader who calls Cog Hill

his home course has sorted out what's important and what isn't in preparing for competition, and how to deal with it.

"You've got to come in with a mindset," Jorski said. "There's a chance of failing, but get out there and do your best and see what happens. After I did it – and I just had five points on the 30-footer, which is not what I wanted – I was like, 'Hey, I still did good!' You can't really do anything else.

"It was a tricky putt. I hit three great drives, three great chips, and hit three pretty darn good putts. You've got to come in confident your game is the best it can be, see how you do, and hope that you win."

Jorski said his father gets the credit for that

belief. And watching golf. He's seen enough on television to know that fine play doesn't always get rewarded, because someone else can pip you.

He said that having gone to the national finals once, he was calmer the second time with a trip on the line.

"Less nerves," he said. "Definitely. I know I've done it before, and I've failed before. So do the best you can do and just have fun. It's not, 'Oh my gosh, if I don't make it ...'

"Golf isn't like baseball or basketball, where you win or lose 50 percent of the time. There's only one winner out of fifteen-ish players, so you've got a 1-in-15 chance."

Jorski finished sixth in the Boys 7-9 bracket in 2018, when he was living in Leawood, Kan.



Michael Jorski • Boys 12-13

“I was too nervous and too focused on winning,” he said. “It was harder to see the actual beauty of the course, how great it really was. But I smoked two drives.”

Jorski said his putting is his best skill, and noted something that might have gone past most competitors.

“It’s three putts (from different distances), getting it as close as possible for points, so you wouldn’t hit it like a normal putt, where you might try to hit it three feet by and take out the break,” Jorski said. “You’ve got to make sure you’ve got the 20 points, the ‘good’ points.”

He’s a Jordan Spieth fan: “When I first started watching golf intently, I was 5-6 years old, watching Jordan Spieth in his prime, winning three majors in two years. You want to root for the player

at his best. You want to root for Michael Jordan, or Tiger Woods.”

Oddly, Spieth isn’t in his dream foursome. The other three are Woods, Justin Thomas and Jordan, with the site Jordan’s Grove 23 layout in Florida.

Away from golf, he’s a fan of school, and teachers.

“Be kind to them,” he said. “They’re there to make you smarter. I like learning – but I don’t like writing essays. My favorite subject is math. I like that there’s a right answer and a wrong answer.”

• • •

Martha Kuwahara of Northbrook takes golf seriously.

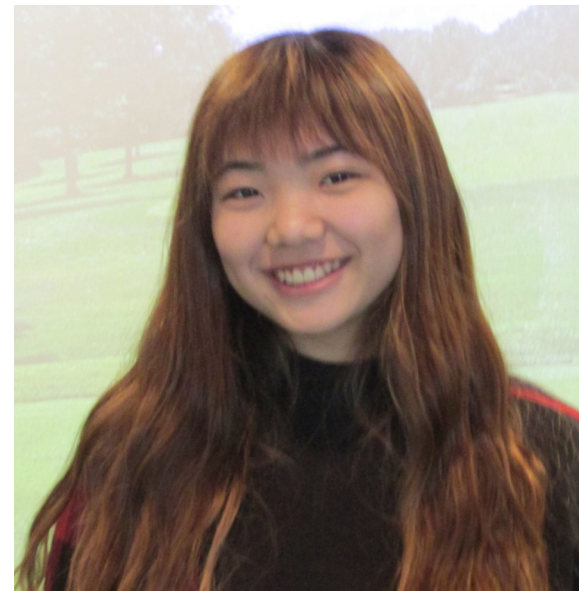
“A lot of my friends say I have an addiction to golf,” Kuwahara said. “I’m probably at The Glen Club eight or 10 hours a day.”

Practicing and playing will pile up the hours, and Kuwahara is piling up the good finishes, including a fifth-place finish in the US Kids teen championship. That’s an indicator of bigger things to come for the 14-year-old from Northbrook.

“I’m very honored to be in this,” Kuwahara said.

She was in gymnastics while living for four years in Japan, but chanced to see the Drive Chip & Putt championship on television. That, and the prospect of injuries in gymnastics, helped her decide to change her sport. Her grandfather, Yasuo, also had a hand in the decision. She would tag along when Yasuo and her older brother Issa would play golf and go fishing. Alas, he passed away before she began to play, so didn’t see her advance to Augusta.

“He was a big role model for me, encouraged



Martha Kuwahara • Girls 14-15

me to do a lot of things,” Kuwahara said. “He still comes to mind when I win tournaments. He never got to see me golf. Sometimes I have lip-ins, and I say, ‘Maybe my grandfather helped me.’ It was my grandpa’s dream for one of us to be in Drive Chip & Putt.”

Between her grandfather and Hideki Matsuyama, the defending Masters champion, she has a pair of great role models.

“Hideki, he makes me realize that even a Japanese player can come to America and win the Masters,” she said. “He gives me the hope that a Japanese person can be on top of the golf world.”

Kuwahara hasn’t been working on the specific skills that are part of the competition going into Augusta. She has bigger aims.

“I’m working on what I need for this season,



Tim Cronin / Illinois Golfer

BOODLE FOR SUCCESS The top three finishers in each category at a regional final get a medal, but unlike the first two rounds, only the winners advance to Augusta National.

do what I usually do,” she explained. “I’m focusing on distance control. Not just 30-foot putts and 15-yard chips. I’m not going to try to stress myself out.”

She said her putting is her best skill, but her favorite clubs are her 54- and 58-degree wedges. She might have mentioned her driver as well, since she can drive it 230 yards – at 14.

Amazingly, just before she hit her drives at Medinah to start the competition, a family friend sent a photo of her grandfather “out of the blue,” she said.

“It was like, ‘What a coincidence.’ My friend didn’t know we were here, and then my name was called.”

•••

As for Augusta National itself, which for

most people is no closer than their television screen, the trip is eagerly looked forward to, even for the returnees.

“I’m very excited to go, because I’ll be putting where they’ve putted, standing where they’ve stood,” Martha Kuwahara said. “I’ll see what they’ve seen. I’m very excited.”

“I’m expecting to have a lot of fun and see the professionals I see on TV,” Eloise Fetzer said.

“I can’t wait to see a practice round,” Lisa Copeland said. “Last time (2017), we were rained out.”

There’s little chance of that this time. Monday’s forecast is mostly sunny and 79 degrees. And Sunday, competition day in Augusta for 80 youngsters, will be perfect, expected to be clear and 75.

Down Memory (and Magnolia) Lane

Since the Drive Chip & Putt Championship began in 2014, 18 Chicago-area players have competed, and two have won. Here’s a look at who’s done what at Augusta National.

2014

G 7-9	Zell Wilson, Chicago	T-4th
B14-15	Patrick Akanirov, Willow Springs	T-7th

2015

G 7-9	Effie Perakis, Glenview	1st
G12-13	Caroline Smith, Inverness	10th
B14-15	Jimmy Morton, Sugar Grove	8th

2016

G10-11	Emily Duan, Schaumburg	T-7th
B10-11	Christian Kim, Vernon Hills	1st
G12-13	Stephanie Su, S. Barrington	4th
B12-13	Eric Klutke, Crystal Lake	T-9th

2017

G 7-9	Lisa Copeland, Naperville	8th
G11-12	Chelsea She, Buffalo Grove	5th

2018

B12-13	Andrew Lim, Naperville	T-6th
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2019

G 7-9	Lillian She, Buffalo Grove	7th
B 7-9	Luciano Giangrossi, Evanston	T-5th
B12-13	Joseph Luchtenburg, W. Chicago	T-8th
B14-15	Joshua Pehl, Sugar Grove	10th

2021

G10-11	Reese Wallace, S. Barrington	6th
B10-11	Logan Keeter, Northbrook	9th



From Youth Skills to the DCP

How the Illinois PGA set the stage for the Drive Chip & Putt Championship

BY TIM CRONIN

Before the Drive Chip & Putt Championship, there was the Youth Skills Challenge, created by the Illinois PGA. And before that, there was the Drive, Chip & Putt Junior Challenge, sponsored by Mutual of Omaha from 2004 through 2008, with the finals in Orlando, Fla.

What?

It's true. The original DCP was sponsored by the insurance company better known for "Wild Kingdom," not something close to the Magic Kingdom. And the original version was televised on Golf Channel, as Sunday's at Augusta National will be.

But despite the similar name, the Mutual of Omaha has about as much connection to the current iteration as Venus does to Mars. You can see both in the sky, but they're not close to each other.

In reality, the Illinois PGA's Youth Skills Challenge is what sparked the creation of the modern Drive Chip & Putt Championship. For that, credit Michael Miller, then the executive director of the Illinois PGA, and Carrie Williams, the current executive director who then was tournament director.

They and the members of Medinah Country Club's community relations committee, including Medinah member Jason Kinander, saw an opportunity to create a youth-oriented competition in



Tim Cronin / Illinois Golfer

ON A ROLL The 2012 Youth Skills Challenge featured little kids and big trophies at Medinah.



advance of the 2006 PGA Championship at Medinah, all the better to publicize the final major of the season. (You might remember Tiger Woods won it, as he did the 1999 PGA at Medinah.)

Williams' job before she joined the Illinois PGA was with a sports marketing firm that ran the youth competitions for the NFL and NHL, a 3-on-3 basketball competition and something called the Toyota Skills Challenge, a golf-oriented eight-skill contest for all ages. When she heard Medinah wanted to do something, she knew what it could be.

"The committee wanted to engage young people in the game," Williams remembered. "We decided to use driving, chipping and putting. We created it in-house. Pro from the section signed up to host at their clubs and public courses. We created the rules sheet, the scorecards, the measuring tapes for them, and they reported the scores to us."

"Carrie executed the whole thing," recalled Barry Cronin, the reporter/publicist who was on the committee. "The finals were on the No. 2 course the Sunday before the PGA. My idea was to get some TV coverage before the PGA, and some cameras came out."

The idea was so successful, the Illinois PGA needed to whittle the winners from the 29 participating courses to a reasonable number, so two regional qualifiers were arranged. The best advanced to Medinah. Along with the competition, everyone got a sneak preview of the tournament site, with a tour of the course and a behind-the-scenes look at corporate suites. The top finishers

in each division received tickets to the PGA for themselves and their parents. A lucky few got to walk inside the ropes during practice rounds with Rich Been and Aaron Oberholser.

The 2006 edition was a big hit locally. The reprise in 2012 in advance of the Ryder Cup attracted much more attention. By this point, Williams was at the Illinois Junior Golf Association, so just a spectator in 2012, but the Illinois PGA built on her plan. And this time, the PGA allowed use of Course No. 3 the Sunday before the Ryder Cup. Players teed off on the first hole with parents filling the grandstand, chipped to the first green, and putted on the second green.

"Golf Channel shot a bunch of B-roll (tape) and used it during the Ryder Cup," recalled Bill Ibrahim, then the Illinois PGA's senior director of operations and public relations. "That winter, the PGA came to us and said they were thinking of using the Youth Skills Challenge as a model for something national."

Miller and Ibrahim gave them copies of all the plans, from scoring to how qualifying worked, and then were invited to the first meeting of what would soon be called the Drive Chip & Putt Championship. Representatives of the USGA and Augusta National were also on hand.

"They wanted to do their own thing," Ibrahim

said. "But to this day, they credit the Illinois PGA for the idea."

The plum was the involvement of Augusta National. It not only hosts, but underwrites the regional finals. PGA sections hosting those, as the Illinois PGA did at Medinah last year and will again this year, get a check from Augusta National for their trouble. And the hosting has grown to include an electronic scoreboard similar to the one used for the finals.

Additionally, Golf Channel shoots highlights at every site, and does a feature on every player, ready to use on Sunday. (It likely helps Golf Channel's enthusiasm that Brian Roberts, chairman of Comcast, which owns Golf Channel and NBC, is an Augusta member.)

Williams helped chaperone one of the groups at last year's final, and marveled at the scope of the competition.

"It was really neat to see how it grew to what it is now," Williams said. "It's the first flavor of competition for a lot of young kids. It's not about who created it or how it started, but how much they enjoy it."

The opportunity to compete at Augusta National is a big deal to most of the players. To go there is a bigger deal to most all of the parents.

"The dads are drooling about their kids qualifying and hoping to go to Augusta National," Miller said. "Having the finals at Augusta, that's what's made it the big thing it is."

As long as kids want to smack a ball and make a putt at Augusta, a big thing it will be.



Tim Cronin / Illinois Golfer



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