

ILLINOIS GOLFER

THE OPENING 9

Thursday,
July 6, 2023

It's Deere (and Clark) season



Tim Cronin / Illinois Golfer

CAITLINMANIA The toast of Iowa, basketball star Caitlin Clark, signed autographs and took selfies at a pace only Arnold Palmer could rival on a golf course during her appearance in the John Deere Classic Pro-Am, the pump-primer for the four-day carnival.

Reporting from Silvis, Illinois

Once upon a time, before John Deere's involvement, the old Quad Cities Open was hosted by **Ed McMahon**. He lured celebrities from Hollywood, up to and including **Jerry Lewis**. Wednesday's John Deere Classic Pro-Am brought back memories of those days.

1 It's not often that a former tournament champion who is on the board of the tournament and is also the current Ryder Cup captain is overshadowed by someone in their group.

But when **Caitlyn Clark** shows up a Titleist's throw from her native Iowa, **Zach Johnson** becomes just another face in the crowd.

"Hey, lady!" Lewis would have cooed.

So it was Wednesday at TPC Deere Run during the pro-am for the 52nd John Deere Classic, which commences a four-day run on Thursday. Clark, the star of Iowa's women's basketball team, is also a reasonably proficient golfer, and jumped at the chance to tee it up with

Johnson, a two-time major champion. Pride of Cedar Rapids, meet the queen of Des Moines, not to mention Iowa City.

They played the back nine together after Clark was paired with PGA Tour rookie **Ludvig Aberg** on the front side. Clark, whose exploits both carried the Hawkeyes to the NCAA title game in the spring and brought increased attention to the women's game, hit a few superb shots and otherwise scrambled to keep the ball in play.

"This is different for me," Clark said. "I'm out of my comfort zone."

Not to the gallery. She posed for selfies and signed autographs after every hole, delighting the fans, especially the many little girls decked out in jerseys and T-shirts emblazoned with Clark's No. 22. It was, for a few brief shining moments, golf's answer to DanicaMania, when **Danica Patrick** arrived in IndyCar and the trees swayed.

Johnson did not need to be introduced.

"She's a great player, and every-

thing she does off the court makes it easy to be a fan," Johnson said. "On Drive Chip and Putt day at Augusta National, the buzz around Augusta National that afternoon was the (NCAA Women's Championship) game that afternoon. One of the Drive Chip and Putt directors was the commissioner of the WNBA (**Cathy Engelbert**). She said to me, 'She's got to go pro next year.'"

Clark is entering her senior season, though Johnson joked he'd try to find a way to keep her in Iowa City three more years.

2 Johnson, who won the Deere in 2012, has earned over \$3 million in 20 appearances. He hasn't missed a Deere cut since 2007. At 47, he knows the years are running out – and that the Champions Tour, with an annual stop in Des Moines, will love to have him.

"I'm still motivated and wanting to play

PUBLISHER / EDITOR TIM CRONIN
ILLINOIS GOLFER / THE OPENING 9
Thursday, July 6, 2023
Vol. 3, No. 1 – Issue 27
© 2023 Illinois Golfer
A Division of CRONIN MULTIMEDIA

high-level golf, specifically win,” Johnson said. “As a competitor, there’s no other real ultimate reason as to why you would compete, and that’s how I work.”

There was a “but” in the full-length version of his thoughts, and it revolved around the Ryder Cup. That’s two months away. His wife will be in Rome next week scoping out places for off-night relaxation.

“The compartmentalization side of things is just that,” Johnson said.

3 Defending champion **J.T. Poston** came into Deere Run on an up last year. This year, he arrives having missed the cup in five of his last seven starts, including the U.S. Open and Travelers, his last two. He has three top-10 finishes this season, but none since a tie for ninth in the World Match Play, where he made the Sweet 16.

What’s gone wrong? Putting, that old bugaboo that affects everyone at times. Poston is 111th on the PGA Tour in putting average, and averages 29 putts per round. That’s 116 per tournament. He had 114 putts in last year’s wire-to-wire victory. Consistency is missing.

“I think the answer is, it’s golf,” Poston said. “I think everybody goes through the things and lows no matter what level you play in.

“You see guys get on runs that last what seems like a couple of years, and then all of a sudden it gets hard again. For me, it feels like getting on nice little runs a few weeks at a time. Then it feels hard again.”

Poston doesn’t have a sports psychologist, but is considering one.

“It’s on my radar,” Poston said.

Poston goes off the first tee Thursday at 12:43 p.m., grouped with **Lucas Glover**, the 2021 Deere champion, and **Michael Kim**, the 2018 winner.

4 Illinoisians abound in the field. Along with recent Illinois grad **Tommy Kuhl**, given a sponsor’s exemption and making his professional debut (at 2:22 p.m. off the first tee), there’s **Kevin Streelman** of Winfield, **Nick Hardy** of Northbrook, **D.A. Points** of Pekin and **Doug Ghim** of Arlington Heights.

Hardy teamed with **Davis Riley** to capture the Zurich Classic earlier this year. He also had his best individual

finish, a tie for fifth, in the Sanderson Farms early in the season, and tied for 20th in the U.S. Open.

Points, a three-time winner on the circuit, has a bizarre Deere record: 14 missed cuts in 15 starts. Ghim had a string of top-20 finishes snapped with a tie for 33rd in Detroit last week, with his best a tie for 12th in the Canadian Open. Streelman, a Tour regular since 2008 and two-time winner, tied for ninth at Colonial, and had only two other top-20s, but has still made over \$1 million this season, shoving him over \$25 million for his career.

5 The other five sponsor exemptions aside from Kuhl and Points: **Marcus Byrd**, **William Mouw**, amateur **Gordon Sargent**, **Kyle Stanley**, **Ross Steelman** and amateur **Michael Thorbjornsen**. Club pro **Jay Giannetto** represents the Iowa PGA Section, which includes northwest Illinois.

Sargent, an Alabaman who attends Vanderbilt, comes to Deere Run as a former NCAA individual champion (2022) and this year’s low amateur in the U.S. Open. Thorbjornsen, a senior at Stanford in the fall, won the 2022 Western Amateur at Glen View Club.

6 Aberg would have been the eighth exemption, but earned status through his No. 1 ranking at PGA Tour University, which has paid off through a pair of top-25 finishes since the Canadian Open.

A Swede who graduated from Texas Tech, Aberg calls his larval tournaments as a professional a learning process.

“All I can do is try to embrace it, try to have fun with it and try to learn as much as I can because there are going to be things that are different,” Aberg said. “I think being OK with being a little bit uncomfortable at times is going to be important.

“It’s a little bit surreal. I almost have to pinch myself when I wake up in the morning, but I’m so fortunate to be here and looking forward to a fun week.”

7 There’s a third amateur in the field, making for the most since three appeared in 2017. **Anders Larson** of Pine Island, Minn., scored 7-under-par 65 at Pinnacle Country Club in Milan, Ill., on Monday to make the show. Larson, who has played since he was 2, is going into his sophomore year at Tennessee Tech.

Notable Round 1 Groupings

Thursday, July 6

TV: Golf Channel, 3 p.m.

Online: ESPN+, 6:45 a.m.

First Tee

7:51 am Chez Reavie, Andrew Landry, Lanto Griffin
8:24 am Jason Dufner, Ryan Moore, Derek Ernst
12:43 pm J.T. Poston, Lucas Glover, Anthony Kim
1:05 pm Nick Hardy, Cam Young, Ludvig Aberg
1:16 pm Dylan Frittelli, Eric Cole, Taylor Montgomery
1:27 pm Ben Martin, Kevin Streelman, Sam Stevens
1:38 pm Aaron Baddeley, Jonathan Byrd, Austin Smotherman
1:49 pm David Lingmerth, Robby Shelton, Will Gordon
2:22 pm Trevor Werbylo, Peter Kuest, Tommy Kuhl

Tenth Tee

6:45 am Patrick Rodgers, Beau Hossler, Greyson Sigg
7:40 am Matt Kuchar, Zach Johnson, Denny McCarthy
8:24 am Kevin Chappell, Doug Ghim, Max McGreevy
12:10 pm D.A. Points, William McGirt, Dylan Wu
12:21 pm Sung Kang, Geoff Ogilvy, Scott Brown
12:54 pm K.H. Lee, Chad Ramey, Martin Laird
1:05 pm Cameron Champ, Joel Dahmen, Robert Streb
1:16 pm Satoshi Kodaira, Sam Ryder, Vince Whaley

8 Coming to the Deere? Then you already know all ticketing is electronic – go to johndeereclassic.com and click on “Buy Tickets” – and they’ll magically appear on your smart phone. A regular grounds ticket is \$50 a day. There are concerts after play concludes Saturday (**Darius Rucker**) and Sunday (**Blake Shelton**) that are included with admission, though gates close each day at 4 p.m.

9 For cable viewers, Golf Channel has three hours of coverage beginning at 3 p.m. The PGA Tour Live coverage commences on ESPN Plus, on up to four streams, at 6:45 a.m., when the first group starts. SiriusXM’s radio coverage begins on the PGA Tour channel at noon.

– Tim Cronin