

ILLINOIS GOLFER

THE OPENING 9

Sunday,
July 9, 2023



Tim Cronin / Illinois Golfer

COMFY SEATING Fans watch defending champion J.T. Poston's group come through the ninths green on Saturday, relaxing in the comfortable seats normally seen on a John Deere riding mower. They're scattered about TPC Deere Run and rarely unoccupied.

Gentlemen, start your birdies

Reporting from Silvis, Illinois

A dozen players within three strokes of leader **Brendon Todd** means Sunday's final round of the 52nd John Deere Classic will be golf's version of an auto race. Whether it will be Formula One, with glamorous birdies and eagles galore, or a demolition derby, with players crashing and burning, remains to be seen.

1 Leader Todd has been in the top 10 all week but overlooked. No longer. His 5-under 66 moved him to 16-under 197 at TPC Deere Run, a stroke ahead of **Alex Smalley**, **Denny McCarthy** and **Adam Schenk**, who scored 62, 66 and 67, respectively, to land at 15-under 198. **Cameron Young**, the 36-hole leader, would have made it a quartet in second place except for a pull-hook at the last from bunker to water – and almost onto **Darius Rucker's** concert stage – that cost him a double-bogey and a spot at

13-under 200.

Todd has gotten himself into the lead with a puissant putter. He's made more than a football field's worth of putts this week – 383 feet, 5 inches, to be exact – including a 26-footer for eagle on the second hole and a 45-foot, 7 inch E-ticket birdie on the par-3 16th featuring about eight feet of break.

"I remember hitting it in practice; it keeps hooking a lot once it gets over that ridge," Todd said. "As it breaks left, it better be high so it can keep coming over. Let's keep it on the high side and see if we can't drip it in, and that's what happened. It was just fantastic."

As would be winning on Sunday.

"It's going to be hard to run away and hide here, but that's the goal," Todd said.

Todd started the week staying in the multi-bedroom "frat house" just outside nearby Geneseo with defending champion **J.T. Poston**, **Chris Kirk**, **Patton Kiz-zire**, **Greyson Sigg**, **Denny McCarthy**

and **Sepp Straka**, as he did last year, but moved out when his family arrived.

"I didn't want to put them through the debauchery so we got a hotel in Moline," Todd said. "It's been a great week so far, and it's pretty cool how that house is playing."

They must turn out the lights early in Geneseo. McCarthy is tied for second, Poston and Kirk are tied for sixth, and Straka and Sigg are tied for 14th.

2 The John Deere Classic seems to fit Smalley like an old shoe. He's low-key. So is the tournament. He's from Rochester, N.Y., a smallish city that features big-time golf, like the Quad Cities.

"I've never really been one who searches for the spotlight," Smalley said.

So much so, he doesn't have a Wikipedia page, but Saturday, the spot-

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light found him. His bogey-free 9-under 62 was the best round of a low-scoring day and vaulted him into the lead until Todd sprinted by.

This is the 26-year-old's second full year on the PGA Tour. He's eager for victory No. 1. Can he handle Sunday's pressure and keep all the rewards – a two-year exemption, Masters and British Open invites, and so on – out of his head?

"It's going to be hard," Smalley admitted. "I haven't been in this situation before. I think that's where having a good caddie on the bag (**Don Donatello**) is going to help focusing on what we're doing. Being super present and in the moment is going to be really important tomorrow."

Smalley's affinity for the Deere was earned, not given. Two years ago, he qualified for the Deere in the Monday four-spot tournament and went on to finish tied for 47th. That kindled a flame for the tournament that still burns.

"I liked the golf course," Smalley said. "I feel it suited me relatively well. I feel very comfortable here. I have it circled on my calendar at the beginning of the year."

If he wins, he gets an exemption into the Scottish Open next week, and from that could play his way into the subsequent British Open at Royal Liverpool. That would be a homecoming of sorts. He went 3-1 representing the U.S. on the Walker Cup team there in 2019.

3 Neither Smalley, McCarthy or Schenk have won on the circuit, but the best story of those trying to break through might be **Peter Kuest**, in solo third at 14-under 199 after Saturday's 6-under 65. He not only hasn't won, he's trying to play his way onto the PGA Tour. Finishing fourth last week in Detroit was a big help. By making the Deere cut, he's locked up Tour status for the rest of the season. But his goal is more lofty.

"We came here this week to win a golf tournament," Kuest said. "We weren't worried about locking up special temporary membership. We knew if we played well, that would take care of itself."

4 Young was stuck in neutral most of the day, then birdied 16 and 17 to get to 15-under, within a stroke of Todd, who was playing in the threesome ahead.

Round 3 Leaders

with Round 4 Tee Time

1	Brendon Todd	66 65 66-197	-16	12:45
T2	Alex Smalley	66 70 62-198	-15	12:45
	Denny McCarthy	68 64 66-198	-15	12:35
	Adam Schenk	65 66 67-198	-15	12:35
5	Peter Kuest	67 67 65-199	-14	12:25
T6	Jonas Blixt	62 73 65-200	-13	12:25
	Chris Kirk	68 66 66-200	-13	12:15
	J.T. Poston	68 67 65-200	-13	12:15
	Lucas Glover	69 65 66-200	-13	12:05
	Kevin Roy	69 63 68-200	-13	12:05
	Mark Hubbard	67 66 67-200	-13	11:55
	William Mouw	66 66 68-200	-13	11:55
	Cameron Young	65 64 71-200	-13	11:40
T14	Sepp Straka	73 63 65-201	-12	11:40
	Greyson Sigg	65 70 66-201	-12	11:30
T16	a-Michael Thorbjornsen	73 63 65-202	-11	11:30

Doug Ghim	70 65 67-202	-11	11:20
Davis Thompson	68 69 65-202	-11	11:20
Adam Svensson	69 66 67-202	-11	11:10
Kevin Yu	70 67 65-202	-11	11:10
Nate Lashley	65 69 68-202	-11	11:00
Garrick Higgo	65 66 71-202	-11	11:00

Notables

T23	Jason Dufner	70 66 67-203	-10	10:40
T39	Kevin Streelman	71 63 71-205	-8	8:55
T39	Zach Johnson	72 66 67-205	-8	8:55
T47	Nick Hardy	67 69 70-206	-7	8:45

Round 4

TV: Golf Channel, noon;
CBS, 2 p.m.

Online: ESPN+, 6:45 a.m.
Radio: SiriusXM, noon

Then disaster struck. Young sailed his tee shot into the bunker on the left side of the 18th fairway, a bunker from which **Zach Johnson** conjured up a birdie to win the 2012 Deere in sudden-death.

For Young, the next shot was just plain death. He pull-hooked it into the pond, so far left it nearly landed on the bank in front the concert stage. His pitch over water left him an 8-foot bogey putt, which he rolled by the cup. It was the only double-bogey of the day at the last.

5 Deere Run was a pushover on Saturday, averaging 2.348 strokes under par (68.652), with the eighth and 13th holes tying for the toughness award at 4.130 strokes each, and the par-5 second the softie at 4.362. The 280 birdies pushed the four-day total to 1,635.

6 **Michael Thorbjornsen** tried to put a lock on low amateur honors on Saturday, scoring 5-under 66 to move to 11-under 205 through 54 holes. That's good for a three-stroke lead on **Gordon Sargent**, whom Thorbjornsen defeated for the 2021 Western Amateur title at the Glen View Club. But Sargent, who shot 2-under 69 Saturday and it tied for 47th, four strokes behind Thorbjornsen, can't be discounted.

This is the first time since 2017 two amateurs made the cut. **Maverick McNealy** beat **Nick Hardy** by two strokes for the honor then.

7 Tournament director **Andrew Lehman's** notion to bring in concerts to boost the crowd paid off for the weekend. Not only did general admission

tickets sell out, the Saturday gathering for the Darius Rucker post-round concert was on hand well before the gates closed at 4 p.m. The hillside on the 18th fairway was filled with chairs and blankets of fans securing their spot to see Rucker's show across the fairway.

With the possible exception of the LIV Golf tournament at Rich Harvest Links last year, it's difficult to recall so many people at a golf tournament who didn't come to watch the golf tournament. The Deere stopped announcing attendance over a decade ago, but it wouldn't be a surprise to have had 25,000 on the grounds at some point Saturday, which a majority hanging about to hear Rucker close the show after play concluded.

8 Sunday's television coverage is split between Golf Channel (noon-2 p.m.) and CBS (2-5 p.m., or conclusion of play), with the PGA Tour Live coverage on ESPN Plus beginning at about 7 a.m. SiriusXM radio coverage on the PGA Tour channel starts at noon.

9 Sunday's first tee time is 6:55 a.m., with Matt Kuchar playing as a single. The final twosome of Todd and Smalley go off at 12:45 p.m. As with Saturday, only high-end tickets remain, general admission for the weekend having sold out on Thursday afternoon. Gates close at 4 p.m., with Blake Shelton's concert expected to begin at about 5:45 p.m., some 45 minutes after play is expected to conclude. A playoff would push the music back.

– **Tim Cronin**