

ILLINOIS GOLFER THE OPENING 9

Monday,
July 10, 2023

Straka strikes gold

Reporting from Silvis, Illinois

Sepp Straka's win in the 52nd John Deere Classic looked like a runaway, then looked like it might not happen at all. But happen it did, by two strokes over **Brendon Todd** and **Alex Smalley**, on a curious day at TPC Deere Run.

1 It's not often that someone with a chance to shoot 59 in the final round suddenly is scrambling to save bogey on the final hole. And, after failing to do so, still wins the tournament.

Say hello to Josef "Sepp" Straka, a 30-year-old Austrian who, unlike most Europeans, has always plied his professional trade in North America. Credit living in the U.S. since he was 14 and his collegiate schooling at Georgia for that.

Credit his Bulldog mentality for rallying from an 11-shot deficit after 18 holes as well. He was 3-over through 14 holes on Thursday, 2-over at the end of the day and a country mile in arrears of first-round leader **Jonas Blixt**, sitting in 133rd place. From there, you can see missing the cut easier than the first page of the leader board. Nobody in Deere history, nor on the PGA Tour since 1983, has come from that far back to lift the trophy.

Beginning with a birdie on the 17th hole Thursday and running through Sunday's 14th hole, Straka played 54 holes in 26-under – amazing even by Deere standards – and stood at a lofty 23-under with four holes to play on Sunday.



Todd Mizener / John Deere Classic

CHAMPION GOLFER OF THE YEAR In Silvis, Ill., at least, is Sepp Straka, whose unorthodox 62 on Sunday secured him the title of John Deere Classic champion.

He was 11-under on the round. Parring in would equal 60. A birdie would get him to 59, golf's magic number.

Two-putt pars followed on the next three holes, the shortest potential birdie from 9 feet, 1 inch on the par-5 17th. It rolled 10 inches past the hole.

At this point, Straka led by five strokes and his closest pursuers, Todd and Smalley, were on the 13th hole. He hammered his drive 299 yards, had a perfect lie and 184 yards to the cup, and came over the top on his approach, hitting what he called his worst shot of the week.

It splashed into the pond to the left of the green, setting up a double-bogey. For a 62 and 21-under 263. Many in the massive gallery at the 18th green were there to see singer **Blake Shelton** after the round and didn't realize Straka was chasing a 59 or that he was leading, but those who knew groaned.

In the end, no harm was done. It was still good enough to emerge triumphant.

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phant, as neither Todd (3-under 68) nor Smalley (4-under 67) could catch him.

"Just found some magic," Straka said. "I really started making some putts. I think that's the key out there. You've got to get the putter hot. Thankfully it stayed hot."

A change in his putting stance, moving his hands higher at address, came about after putting coach **Tim Yelverton** texted on Thursday night and noticed the toe of the putter was a bit in the air. The payoff three days later was \$1,332,000 and a jump to 18th in the PGA Tour point standings from 50th.

After a 35-putt Thursday, he needed only 26, 27 and 25 rolls the rest of the weekend.

2 Until the miscue at the last, Straka was a wonder, pulling away from the field like a thoroughbred racing to a 15-length victory. The binge of four straight birdies beginning at the 13th threatened to overshadow his going out in 7-under 28, including a 20-footer for eagle on the par-5 second.

"The last time I did that? Maybe Friday," Straka said with a chuckle. "I got pretty hot on Friday too."

Straka played the final three rounds in 63-65-62, or 23-under 190, a John Deere Classic record.

Amazingly, he's not the first player this season to double-bogey the final hole and win. Emiliano Grillo did so at Colonial. But Straka may be the first in JDC history to do so.

3 Todd, a former teammate of Straka's at Georgia and housemate in the Geneseo bed-and-breakfast several players stayed at this week, was the leader at daybreak and Smalley was among three players a stroke behind. Straka was four back, but right with them by the time they teed off.

"On 8 or 9 I saw that Sepp had gotten to 22- or 23-under, which was obviously amazing," Todd said. "Anyone could have gone out there and shot a great round today, and he did it."

If Straka had moseyed his way to a 68 or so, Todd and Smalley would have headed back to the 18th tee for a playoff after matching totals of 19-under 265. Instead, all they could do was tip their caps.

"I actually had no idea what was

Leading Finishers

1 Sepp Straka	73 63 65 62-263 -21
T2 Brendon Todd	66 65 66 68-265 -19
Alex Smalley	66 70 62 67-265 -19
T4 Ludvig Aberg	68 64 71 63-266 -18
Adam Schenk	65 66 67 68-266 -18
T6 Grayson Murray	64 70 69 65-268 -16
Kevin Yu	70 67 65 66-268 -16
Cameron Young	65 64 71 68-268 -16
Mark Hubbard	67 66 67 68-268 -16
Lucas Glover	69 65 66 68-268 -16
J.T. Poston	68 67 65 68-268 -16
Denny McCarthy	68 64 66 70-268 -16
T13 Seamus Power	66 69 70 64-269 -15
Stephan Jaeger	68 69 66 66-269 -15
Greyson Sigg	65 70 66 68-269 -15
William Mouw	66 66 68 69-269 -15
T17 a-Michael Thorbjornsen	73 63 66 68-270 -14

Troy Merritt	69 67 69 65-270 -14
Peter Kuest	67 67 65 71-270 -14
Jonas Blixt	62 73 65 70-270 -14
T21 Nick Hardy	67 69 70 65-271 -13
Nate Lashley	65 69 68 69-271 -13
Garrick Higgo	65 66 71 69-271 -13
Adam Svensson	69 66 67 69-271 -13
Chris Kirk	68 66 66 71-271 -13
T26 Yuto Katsuragawa	72 63 68 69-272 -12
Tano Goya	67 68 68 69-272 -12
Ryan Gerard	71 65 67 69-272 -12
Beau Hossler	69 67 67 69-272 -12
Doug Ghim	70 65 67 70-272 -12

Notables

T31 Jason Dufner	70 66 67 70-273 -11
T35 Zach Johnson	72 66 67 69-274 -10
T51 Kevin Streelman	71 63 71 71-276 -8

going on," Smalley said. "I didn't look at all, and that was my plan. I just wanted to do what I was focused on, and felt like I did that pretty well today.

"Any time you can finish tied for second, it's hard to be upset with that. If it wasn't enough, then it wasn't enough, and Sepp deserves to win with a 62. That's incredible playing."

Don't feel bad for them. Each made \$658,600.

4 Straka's victory jumped him into the conversation for the European Ryder Cup team. Northwestern alum **Luke Donald**, the captain, has six selections for his 12-man squad. As a PGA Tour regular, Straka's only way to automatically qualify is through world ranking points, and at 27th, that's likely not high enough.

"September is a few months away, and I'd glad my game is in good shape," Straka said. "Hopefully I can make a push for that."

5 Northbrook's **Nick Hardy** rallied on Sunday with a closing 6-under 65 for 13-under 271, tying for 22nd and earning \$84,138. It's his best Deere finish in four starts.

Arlington Heights' **Doug Ghim** tied for 26th, while Winfield native **Kevin Streelman** was in a deadlock for 51st.

6 **Michael Thorbjornsen** wrapped up low-amateur honors with a closing 3-under 68 and tied for 17th, the second-best finish for an amateur in JDC history. **Patrick Rodgers** tied for 15th a decade ago.

Thorbjornsen pulled away from **Gordon Sargent**, whose even-par 71 landed him in a tie for 57th.

7 Crowds swarmed the course, especially around the 18th hole, hours before the conclusion of play, jockeying their chairs into position to watch the hour-long concert by country music performer Blake Shelton. The tournament doesn't announce attendance, but few argued with the estimate of 28,500, of which nearly half were packed onto the hill to the right of the 18th fairway and in the big dining tent on the patio.

It was a larger crowd that **Darius Rucker** drew on Saturday, and in each case the largest for a weekend round at TPC Deere Run in years.

8 The return of the Deere-chartered jet to Scotland was a hit. Twenty-six players, plus their caddies and families in most cases, took off from Quad City International on Sunday night for a non-stop trip to Scotland.

9 Final-round scoring was exactly two strokes under the par of 71, the lowest since 2019, while the tournament average of 69.472 was the lowest since 2018. Ten of the 18 holes played under par, with the 18th the toughest on Sunday and the ninth the toughest for the week. The par-5 second was, as usual, as soft as a kitten's tummy.

The final round yielded 294 birdies, bringing the five-day total to 1,929, down from last year's 2,041, which raised a record \$13.9 million via Birdies for Charity. — **Tim Cronin**