

ILLINOIS GOLFER THE OPENING 9

Thursday,
July 8, 2021

Nowlin wins IWO by 2

Deere starts today

1 Tristyn Nowlin barreled into Mistwood Golf Club with a goal, and accomplished it.

She had won the Michigan Women's Open in her second start as a professional after graduating from Illinois. Now she has won her third start, her 2-under-par 70 on Wednesday morning for 8-under 208 bringing her a two-stroke victory in the 26th **Phil Kosin** Illinois Women's Open.

Nowlin's round was punctuated by a birdie on the par-4 16th hole, that 3 allowing her to break a tie with **Ueakarn "Lookyee" Songprasert**, a similarly freshly-minted professional. Songprasert then bogeyed the par-3 17th, three-putting from nine feet to fall two strokes behind, and there the margin stayed when both parred the treacherous par-5 18th.

For Nowlin, the \$5,000 will be devoted to help financing her quest to qualify for the Symerta Tour, the stepping-stone to the LPGA circuit. She earned \$6,500 for winning the MWO, so these last couple of weeks have been lucrative for the Richmond, Ky., native. Songprasert, who closed with a 1-under 71, earned \$2,500 as runner-up.

"Lookyee played amazing," Nowlin said. "I slowed myself down and said, I don't really have control over exactly where this ball ends up, but I have control over the line I choose and how committed I am to the swing."

Nowlin, 22, had been runner-up in the 2018 Women's Western Amateur at Mistwood, and played in an AJGA tournament previous to that, so knew the course coming in, whereas many others in the field were new to the testing Ray



Rory Spears

CHAMPION GOLFER OF THE YEAR Tristyn Nowlin with the traditional on-the-bridge pose with the Phil Kosin Illinois Women's Open Trophy at Mistwood Golf Club.

Hearn layout.

"I've probably played here 20 times," Nowlin said. "Those previous finishes give me a bit of an edge. There's confidence knowing I can play well here."

"This week's been a real blast. It's like I took a little trip down to campus for two weeks and was back to play again."

Nowlin's next stop is in her home state. She'll play the Kentucky Women's Open, followed by similar showcases in Tennessee and Florida later in the summer.

2The 50th John Deere Classic starts today at TPC Deere Run in Silvis, with \$1.116 million on offer to the winner and \$6.2 million in the kitty overall.

Dylan Frittelli is the defending champion, and eight other former winners are in the field, including three-timer **Steve Stricker**, **Brian Harman** and local favorite – well, Cedar Rapids, which is close

enough – **Zach Johnson**.

That's standard introduction for a tournament, but there's more to the Deere than trying to sell Gators and combines. This is the tournament that's all but owned by the town. Comparisons to the Green Bay Packers, the last of the town teams in American professional sports, are apt. The Birdies for Charity operation connects the golf competition with people who wouldn't have known a birdie from a bogey before they got involved. And involved they are. Johnson, who won in 2012, sees it firsthand as a member of the board.

"I love everything about this tournament," Johnson said. "I love what it stands for. I love the people surrounding it and who's associated. Certainly it

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starts with John Deere and their pursuits and frankly their priority in helping this community. And second I would say it's the community and how they rally behind it and make it their own.

"I'm encouraged not only for this year, but I'm really, really encouraged for the future, for the event. We're at 50 years, which is mindboggling, but very special. It doesn't surprise me; that's Midwest people just doing the right thing."

Growing up nearby, and going to Drake on a golf scholarship, Johnson saw playing in the then-Hardees Golf Classic as a mountain to climb.

"I actually remember my roommate in college who shockingly enough was our best player, he was really good, Monday qualified at Emeis, and that was our senior year," Johnson said. "So the early summer just after we graduated in '98, and I remember driving him up there and his dad caddied for him, but I remember driving in, and I'm like, man, this is a big deal. It was just really cool seeing all the people out there and so close to home, just to witness that. I'm like, man, I've got to get in this event.

"I tried to Monday (qualify) a couple times and didn't make it, and then obviously John Deere stepped in and took this tournament to new heights."

In 2002 and 2003, Johnson received sponsor exemptions. He missed the cut each year, but had his PGA Tour card in 2004, played and finished 20th. He hasn't missed a Deere since.

"**Clair Peterson** (the Deere's tournament director) and **Kym Hougham** before him saw something in a short little kid from Cedar Rapids and wanted to help him chase his dream," Johnson said.

"I owe a lot to just the trajectory of my game to this place, to this event and certainly to John Deere. Every single week can be a positive regardless of what you shoot, and I missed the cuts in both those sponsor exemptions. But the knowledge and the wisdom that I gained just Monday through Sunday certainly and on the golf course, I mean, the specifics of putting and just getting the golf course down, I'm probably in debt.

"This place has just given me so much personally, and that pales in comparison to what it's given so many

charities, so many organizations and just how they every year exceed probably expectations as far as the dollar amount they provide for this community.

"It has everything to do with the people. It has everything to do with Clair and his staff here, certainly everything to do with John Deere and how they go about their business, both locally and globally. It's just a unique event. I feel like there's maybe two or three events that you can kind of put in this echelon where it's their own. It's almost – it's the fabric of John Deere. It's the fabric of this community."

3 Stricker feels the same way. He's here even though he's the defending – from 2019 – champion in the U.S. Senior Open, being played down Interstate 80 at Omaha Country Club this very week.

"It's a special week here," Stricker said. "It's 50 years here for the John Deere Classic. Having this tournament mean so much to me over the years, it just felt like a no-brainer to come back here and to play here. It's an easy trip for me. It's in the car, drive three hours (from Madison) and I'm here. Like I said, it's a special place for me and my family."

At 54, this is likely Stricker's last appearance. And it comes 10 years after the third of his back-to-back-to-back victories at Deere Run. In that one, he bunkered his approach at the 72nd hole, slashed it out to the back fringe, then rolled in a 25-footer to win.

"I don't even know what year it is to tell you the truth," Stricker said of the 2011 stunner, which he counts as his favorite of the three. "The one I hit it out of the bunker and made the putt to birdie the last and to really kind of steal it from Kyle Stanley. Yeah, that one I get the most kind of reward out of seeing and kind of replaying in my mind again. I mean, I just didn't have a lot of moments like that in my career, right, so it was a special one.

"To do it here at a special place for me, it meant a lot.

"I always enjoy coming here, and it's been hard to miss the last few years, to tell you the truth," Stricker said. "The Senior Players has been opposite the John Deere Classic, so that was switched this year, and being 50 years I thought it

was a good time to be here at the John Deere."

4 Key tee times on Thursday: surprise dew-sweeper **Kevin Strelman** at 6:45 a.m. off No. 10; defending champion Dylan Frittelli and former winners Brian Harman and Steve Stricker at 7:18 a.m. off No. 10 (and at 12:43 p.m. Friday off No. 1, for afternoon TV); **Camilo Villegas** at 8:24 a.m. off No. 1; **K.J. Choi**, **J.J. Spaun** and Arlington Heights' **Doug Ghim** at 12:21 p.m. off No. 10; **Daniel Berger**, **Kevin Na** and Zach Johnson at 12:43 p.m. off No. 1; and qualifier **Luke Gannon** of downstate Mahomet (and Wichita, Kan.), off No. 1 at 2:22 p.m. in the last group of the day.

5 TV info for Thursday: the Deere is on Golf Channel from 3-6 p.m., preceded and followed by coverage of the U.S. Senior Open. It's also on PGA Tour Radio, available on Sirius/XM.

6 The Deere, nicknamed the Little Tournament that Did, is the place than breeds first-time winners. Notables over the years include **Roger Maltbie** (who also met his future wife at the tournament), **Scott Hoch**, **Payne Stewart**, **Jordan Spieth** and Bryson DeChambeau.

7 Monday's four qualifiers have their work cut out for them. Only 21 percent have made the cut since the four-spot format began in 1983, and just four of the last 28 four-spotters have played on the weekend. The best finish of those was **Chris Naegel's** tie for 50th in 2015. **Steve Lowery**, who tied for seventh in 1991, has the best finish of any four-spotter.

8 Bar bet trivia: There hasn't been an ace in the Deere since 2014, when Charles Howell III plunked a gap wedge on the uphill third hole.

9 Fourteen players in the Deere field are playing in the British Open, and will be taking the Deere-sponsored charter to an airport near Royal St. George's on Sunday night.

Among that group: Johnson, Harman, Na and Berger.