

ILLINOIS GOLFER THE OPENING 9

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Peterson's finale a testament to growth of the Deere

REPORTING FROM SILVIS, ILLINOIS

1 The Quad Cities is alive and with the thrum of major league sports this week, the only week of the year it gets to enjoy that spotlight.

It's the John Deere Classic, of course, that attracts the attention, and for the last 20 years, the Deere's reins have been controlled by **Clair Peterson**. A Deere & Company executive before first assisting then-tournament director **Kim Hougham** and eventually succeeding him, Peterson's largely responsible for the status of the Deere as a community fixture and a presence on the PGA Tour that punches above its weight.

"When you have somebody that's passionate about what he does or she does it's attractive and Clair always had that," said **Zach Johnson**, the Cedar Rapids phenom, who was awarded a pair of sponsor's exemptions by Peterson early in his career, became a Deere winner in 2012, and has for years been on a tournament board. "He's always represented I would say his role in the highest of integrity and character of ways and we see that. So we're spoiled too. We got other great tournaments. This one is just a little bit different, I think. I'm biased, but it starts with the people."

Peterson retires from from the tournament staff at the end of the year – he's now the executive director, and longtime assistant **Andrew Lehman** is the tournament director – and thus he was feted on Tuesday, not only by Johnson, but by relative newcomers like **Nick Hardy** of Northbrook and even Tour insiders like media official **Doug Milne**, who wondered if he could handle the job – the Deere happened to be his first tournament – and Peterson assured him he could.

Peterson will become a special ad-

visor to Lehman – a titled volunteer, as it were – and says he'll concentrate on the Monday pro-am that helps raise charity money. At the Deere, it always seems to come back to charity.

"Clair Peterson is very special to the Quad Cities," Johnson said. "He's not going away, I'm not going to say goodbye, it's a new chapter. So congratulations and thank you I think are in order.

"I don't like speaking of hypotheticals and speaking for somebody else, but I do know when it comes to my peers they're like, 'Man, I wish I could play this year because I love Clair.' And just the opposite too, but along the same line, 'Yeah, I'm going to come this year because Clair keeps getting on me.' It kind of goes both ways. There's just distinct respect."

Indeed, this year, with the Deere having moved up a week, two weeks after the U.S. Open and two weeks before the British Open, a field with more big names was expected. That didn't turn out, in part because the PGA Tour now co-sponsors the Scottish Open the week before the British. But **Webb Simpson**, who early in his pro career was one of the young players Peterson awarded an exemption, and rose to U.S. Open champion, is back this year as a thank you to Peterson. He also happens to be the top-ranked player at Deere Run this week, tied for 58th in the world rankings.

The payback sometimes is short-lived – you won't be seeing **Bryson DeChambeau** for the foreseeable future, now that he's signed with the LIV Golf circuit – but often players are more loyal. Figure Hardy to be in that camp. He's not only back this year, but has a chance to win.

"I'm just excited to be back here," Hardy said Tuesday. "This is my favorite



John Deere Classic

THE MAN Clair Peterson has built a tournament of distinction on the PGA Tour.

event of the year for me. Clair giving me two spots here (first) as a senior at Illinois and then as my first year out, I mean, it means the world to me, and I gained a lot of good experience from playing those two events those two years, and making the cut both weeks just added more experience."

Hardy's in on his own number this year, a Tour regular who contended deep into the U.S. Open after falling in a playoff at The Glen Club on the Korn Ferry Tour coming off a wrist injury, and then grabbing a top-10 at Hartford last week. That's the short-term resume of someone ready to win.

"I think I'm really excited about the rest of the summer," Hardy said. "I think I've grown a lot as a pro golfer this year, just like every year I've been a pro, but I think if I can keep on building what I'm building on, I'll keep going up."

A few years ago, a reporter told Peterson the Deere, the big deal in the small town, was the Green Bay Packers of the PGA Tour. Peterson's eyes lit up, as he's a Packers fan. The parallels

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fit. While golf tournaments don't draw like football – 20,000 is a huge crowd at TPC Deere Run – the number that matters in golf is the charitable contribution, and there the Deere scores points. The average in recent years – even the COVID-19 pandemic year of 2020, when the tournament was not played – has been a \$12 million-plus charitable contribution to community charities, who use the tournament's unique Birdies for Charity operation to garner donations based on pledges keyed to the number of birdies. Per capita, nothing on the PGA Tour touches it, and it's ahead of almost every tournament in raw dollars.

Over the years, Deere & Company has not only paid for the costs of the charity, but kicked in real money as well. Last year, charities received an eight percent bonus on top of what they raised. Since Deere arrived in 1998, over \$142 million has been raised for charity.

"The charitable affect of the tournament means a lot to 'em," Peterson said Tuesday. "So if you go to other events, those title sponsors aren't necessarily in that hometown, in that town. I would say that there are other events that are envious, but we never have taken that for granted and we always want to make sure that they get their money's worth. Because if they ever decide not to renew, it's going to be hard pressed to find another title sponsor with that kind of strength."

The current Deere contract with the PGA Tour, which includes golf course equipment for every TPC course, not just TPC Deere Run, ends after next year's tournament. Deere has sponsored what began as the Quad Cities Open since 1998. You don't have to guess what Peterson's recommendation to the brass in the Eero Sarrinen-designed buildings on the hill a couple miles from TPC Deere Run will be.

2 **Webb Simpson** has another reason to return to the Deere for the first time since 2010. He got engaged during the 2009 Deere.

"It was on Saturday night down by the river," Simpson said. My caddie had the ring. I was 99 percent sure (Taylor) would say yes. We had it all set up. But there were some folks on the river who'd

had one too many cocktails and almost ruined it. A couple yelled, 'Did she say yes?,' but Taylor didn't know what they were referring to.

And she said yes. They were married six months later.

3 **Nick Hardy** even got some pro-am experience on Wednesday. The tournament sponsor gets 10 picks to slot pros in, and Hardy got one of them, grabbing nine holes in the morning.

4 For a guy on the rise, **Nick Hardy** didn't get a great tee time. He's in the last group on Thursday morning, starting at 8:57 a.m. That doesn't sound bad, but it also means he's in Friday's last group, starting at 2:22 p.m. on the 10th tee and playing on bumpy greens.

5 Hardy's pal **Patrick Flavin**, is in a similar tee time boat, starting at 2:22 p.m. Thursday on the first tee and at 8:57 a.m. Friday off No. 10. Unlike Hardy, Flavin's a sponsor exemption and a late tee time could be expected.

6 Coming to the Deere? It's a three-hour ride from Chicago, parking is off-site, and all tickets are digital in this post-COVID era we live in. For details, see www.johndeereclassic.com.

7 **Jason Day** is another former sponsor exemption (2006, T-67 in his PGA Tour debut) who planned to come back to honor Peterson this week. Like Simpson, he's won a major, plus is a former world No. 1. Alas, his too-often wonky back seized up before his Wednesday pro-am, and he was forced to withdraw.

8 Speaking of exemptions, keep an eye on **Quinn Riley** this week. The recent Duke graduate is making his Tour debut thanks to Peterson. Riley missed the cut by a shot in a Korn Ferry tournament earlier in June. Peterson took Riley's letter detailing his First Tee experience getting into the game to heart.

9 **Charles Jahn** of Sperry, Iowa, grabbed the last qualifying place with a 35-foot birdie on the third hole of sudden death in Monday's qualifier, eliminating **Kyle Wilshire**.

Key Tee Times

Thursday (CT)

First Tee

6:45 a.m.: Emiliano Grillo, Maverick McNealy, Brandon Hagy

7:51 a.m.: Austin Cook, Rory Sabbatini, Vince Whaley

8:13 a.m.: Andrew Putnam, Kelly Kraft, Scott Gutschewski

8:57 a.m.: Chase Seiffert, Nick Hardy, a-Nathan Petronzio

12:43 p.m.: Webb Simpson, Lanto Griffin, Jason Day

12:54 p.m.: Charles Howell III, Brandt Snedeker, Sahith Theegala

1:05 p.m.: Lucas Glover, Dylan Frittelli, Zach Johnson

2:22 p.m.: Michael Gligic, David Skinnis, Patrick Flavin

Tenth Tee

6:56 a.m.: Wesley Bryan, D.A. Points, Kramer Hickok

7:51 a.m.: Kevin Streelman, Nick Watney, Mark Hensby

8:02 a.m.: Kevin Chappell, Vaughn Taylor, Denny McCarthy

8:24 a.m.: Chris Stroud, David Hearn, Omar Uresti

12:32 p.m.: Charley Hoffman, Ben Martin, Shawn Stefani

1:05 p.m.: Jason Dufner, Aaron Baddeley, Cameron Percy

1:16 p.m.: Grayson Murray, Ryan Moore, Parker McLaughlin

1:27 p.m.: Henrik Norlander, Doug Ghim, Max McGreevy

Television

7 a.m. (apx.), ESPN+, four channels

2 p.m., Golf Channel

Radio

Noon, PGA Tour Radio