

ILLINOIS GOLFER

THE OPENING 9

Friday,
July 7, 2023

Blixt clicks for openers

Reporting from Silvis, Illinois

How Swede it was on Thursday for **Jonas Blixt**, leading the 52nd John Deere Classic by a pair of strokes after a nearly-perfect opening round. That and more in The Opening 9:

1 Jonas Blixt, in his ninth start of the season, surprised the field with a 9-under-par 62 on Thursday morning.

He also surprised himself.

"I had struggled a lot (for) a few months there, and found something this week after playing the Korn Ferry last week," the 39-year-old said. "When you don't have much confidence in your game and you find something, you kind of go out and see. I mean, 62 doesn't happen very often on the PGA Tour, at least not for me."

True. His other 62 came in the third round of the 2015 Wyndham, which is a long time, a swing change and one back surgery ago.

"Golf is weird," Blixt said, echoing every other golfer in the history of the world. Tomorrow I can shoot 100, but today was a great day."

Blixt's swing change came through work with his coach back in Sweden.

"Starting in mid-May is was a lot of small tweaks, a little but everywhere. Sometimes, there's a little bit of doubt in there," Blixt said. "Today I got into a really good rhythm. We'll see how they work out tomorrow."

Blixt duplicated defending champion **J.T. Poston's** 62 from last year. Poston led wire-to-wire. Blixt would take that, but was pleased just to be leading by two strokes over **Grayson Murray**, whose 7-under 64 was the best score of the afternoon. Blixt is three strokes ahead of a sixsome: **Nate Lashley**, **Adam Schenk**,



J.R. Howell / John Deere Classic

THE NEW SWING Jonas Blixt's tweaked swing paid off Thursday at the John Deere Classic in the form of a 9-under-par 62 at TPC Deere Run.

Garrick Higgo and Greyson Sigg, whose 6-under 65s were accomplished in the morning, and afternoon heroes **Richy Werenski and Cameron Young**.

Young was headed for a 64 with a par at the last, but drove behind a tree at the dinner hour and was stymied.

Blixt went out in 2-under 33, including an eagle on the par-5 second. At TPC Deere Run, that's just keeping pace. But his 7-under 29 featured five birdies and an eagle on the downhill par-4 14th, constructed via a 361-yard drive to the green and a 43-foot putt.

He's won twice on the Tour as an individual, plus a team title with **Cam Smith** in 2017. But his last individual win was the Greenbriar Classic in 2013, which is an eternity in golf. That's one reason he was in the first group of the day. The 6:45 a.m. tee time meant arriving at the course before sunrise, but after he finished, the rest of the day

PUBLISHER / EDITOR **TIM CRONIN**
ILLINOIS GOLFER / THE OPENING 9
Friday, July 7, 2023
Vol. 3, No. 2 – Issue 28
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was open. After a couple of practice drills on the range, he planned to head to the nearby Niabi Zoo with **Henrick Norlander** and his family.

"I'm a big fan of zoos," Blixt said.

For a change, he'd be on the outside of the ropes looking in.

2In January in Bermuda, Grayson Murray ended up with 50 stitches in his face and other injuries after the scooter he was on was hit by a truck. Lucky to not be injured more severely, Murray is on the comeback trail, jumping between the PGA and Korn Ferry tours.

His opening 64 matched his best round on the KFT this season, and could end up earning him a lot more.

"It's a good start, would like to keep it going the next few days and be in position on Sunday," Murray said. "I've been working a lot on things off the course, and it makes my golf seem easier."

Some of his off-course work is on his mental attitude.

"I'm trying to make it where it's not my life, it's just something I do," Murray said.

3Northbrook's **Nick Hardy** looks more and more like someone who'll be on the PGA Tour a long time. He came into the Deere 46th in the point standings and 152nd in the world. He teamed with **Davis Riley** to win the Zurich Classic earlier in the season, so is exempt through 2024-25.

At 27, he's coming into his own. A tie for 20th in the U.S. Open might be harbinger of what's to come.

"I feel I'm a much more mature player out here; I'm better all-around with my game, physically, mentally, making good strides," Hardy said. "It's hard to get better and better."

That maturity added up to 4-under 67 on Thursday even with a bogey at the last, hitting nine fairways and 12 greens.

"I played great; if I keep doing that, it'll be a good week," Hardy said.

4"My goal is not to make the cut; my goal is to contend."

Thus spake **Tommy Kuhl** after his first round on the PGA Tour. The recent Illinois grad from downstate Morton scored 1-under 70, a round that opened with a pair of birdies and closed with a 20-footer for birdie on the par-5 17th, which earned a whoop from the two doz-

en fans following him, and a near miss for a closing bird from similar distance at the last.

Kuhl's made two cuts, both top-30 finishes, in three Canadian tour starts. But this is the big time. With it came nervous energy for his 2:22 p.m. tee time.

"I was super nervous before they called my name, and then I felt pretty at peace," Kuhl said. "I was pretty confident. Obviously I was prepared. There were still some nerves walking down One Fairway."

After a 326-yard drive, no less. Sinking a 7-footer for birdie to start his Tour career took the edge off, and two-putting from 28 feet for a birdie on the par 5 second was even better.

"It was better than what I expected," Kuhl said of the experience. "This is the life I want to live. This is going to push me to get here. I think I can compete with these players."

You get the feeling Kuhl is going to be the next Nick Hardy.

The cut is usually 3- or 4-under, so a 4-under 67 on Friday would put Kuhl in good shape for the weekend.

5The Deere's Birdies for Charity program is the phenomenal fund-raising arm, bringing in more than \$13 million last year. So far this year, 684 birdies have been recorded, 107 in Wednesday's pro-am and 577 in round 1. That compares to 678 at this point last year.

6If you have heard of **Carlos Estanislao Goya**, nicknamed **Tano**, you follow golf very closely. For the rest of us, he's a 35-year-old Argentine who won once on the European Tour and earned his PGA Tour card via the Korn Ferry route last fall.

Goya's best finish so far was a tie for 11th at the Puerto Rico Open. Thursday, he took a step toward bettering that, scoring 4-under 67 and landing in a tie for 14th after the first round.

Goya made his score with four straight birdies commencing on the 18th, his ninth hole of the round.

7The course played about a stroke under the par of 71, even with a wind that blew steadily at 15 mph in the afternoon. Eighty-eight players broke par and another 26 were at par. The 70.179 reading was over a stroke lower than last year's first round, also conducted on a

Round 1 Leaders

with Round 2 Tee Time (*-10th tee)

1 Jonas Blixt	33 29-62	- 9	12:10*
2 Grayson Murray	33 31-64	- 7	7:07
T3 Greyson Sigg	34 31-65	- 6	12:10
Garrick Higgo	33 32-65	- 6	12:43*
Adam Schenk	32 33-65	- 6	12:43
Nate Lashley	33 32-65	- 6	1:38*
Richy Werenski	31 34-65	- 6	7:18
Cam Young	32 33-65	- 6	7:40
T9 Seamus Power	36 30-66	- 5	12:43
Brendon Todd	34 32-66	- 5	12:54*
Alex Smalley	34 32-66	- 5	6:45*
Akshay Bhatia	30 36-66	- 5	8:35
William Mouw	32 34-00	- 5	8:57
T14 Kramer Hickok	33 34-67	- 4	12:32
Mark Hubbard	32 35-67	- 4	1:16
Jimmy Walker	33 34-67	- 4	1:27*
Tano Goya	32 35-67	- 4	2:11
Byeong Hun An	34 33-67	- 4	6:56*
Nick Hardy	32 35-67	- 4	7:40*
Satoshi Kodaira	34 33-67	- 4	7:51
Chris Stroud	34 33-67	- 4	8:13
Peter Kuest	35 32-67	- 4	8:57

Notables

T23 J.T. Poston	37-31-68	- 3	7:18*
T64 D.A. Points	34 36-70	- 1	6:45
Doug Ghim	34 36-70	- 1	1:49
Dylan Wu	34 36-70	- 1	6:45
a-Gordon Sargent	36 34-70	- 1	2:22
Tommy Kuhl	34 36-70	- 1	8:57
T89 Kevin Streelman	34 37-71	E	8:02*
T115 Zach Johnson	38 34-72	+1	1:05

Round 2

TV: Golf Channel, 3 p.m.

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

breezy day. As usual, the par-4 18th hole was the toughest (4.179), while the par-5 second was the easiest (4.615 strokes).

8Friday's television schedule duplicates Thursday's, with Golf Channel's show running from 3-6 p.m., PGA Tour Live via ESPN Plus opening at 6:45 a.m. and going to the finish. SiriusXM radio chatters from noon-6 p.m.

9Never discount the power of music. General admission tickets for Saturday and Sunday, each featuring a post-round concert (**Darius Rucker** and **Blake Shelton**, respectively), have sold out at \$50 per ducat. Deere officials won't say how many tickets, but it's likely calculated on the capacity of the public parking lots nearby. All spectators are shuttled in.

- **Tim Cronin**