

Golf: St. Louis City Championship makes revival



JANUARY 08, 2015 11:25 PM • BY DAN O'NEILL

It took some 60 years for a city championship revitalization the first time around. This time, it took less than 12 months.

The amateur championship will be resuscitated in 2015, conducted on Aug. 29-30 at Forest Park. The news comes some seven months after the plug was pulled on the 2014 St. Louis City Championship.

Research has shown the amateur title was first in contention at the park in 1914, which makes it

the oldest championship in town. The original tournament was played on and off until disappearing during World War II.

By comparison, The St. Louis District Championship, aka the Greisedieck Men's Championship, was first conducted in 1916 and secured by Roger Lord. The district event went on hiatus during WWII years, but it has been competed for continuously ever since.

Local patriarch Bart Collida and Forest Park golf potentate Jeff Raffelson unearthed black and white photos and revived the St. Louis City Championship in 2004, coinciding with the opening of the renovated courses at Forest Park.

The championship was conducted for 10 consecutive seasons until last summer's cancellation. When Anheuser-Busch informed Collida it was pulling financial sponsorship, dominoes fell and Collida had to fold the scorecards.

In today's tight economy and crowded golf picture, future viability of the event seemed in doubt. But reaction was swift.

"My phone never stopped ringing," Collida said. "Everybody was upset. People were calling and saying, 'We can't let this happen.'"

"The idea of a St. Louis city championship not being played was really upsetting to them. They said, 'What can we do, how can we help?' I said, 'Well, you can go out and find some money.'"

Among those who contacted Collida was Mel Rector, a senior vice president for National Healthcare Corporation in Missouri and heretofore known as the "City Championship Archangel."

Rector told Collida that NHC would pick up the standard and carry it as the sponsor. A St. Louis

native, Rector grew up in Ferguson. He is a member of Bellerive and Lake Forest country clubs and is president of the St. Louis District Golf Association.

Rector said NHC, which is a senior services company, considers community involvement part of its mission statement. He sees sponsoring St. Louis' only city championship at its crown jewel park as an opportunity.

In tune with NHC's commitment, Raffelson and Collida are working on a vehicle to donate money each year from the championship budget to the advancement of golf opportunities in city schools. While it was never publicized, the championship operation annually has made some type of donation to a charitable cause. Now it hopes to target help toward city schools.

"The main reason we choose to embrace the City Championship is related to our support of amateur golf in the region," Rector said. "It's a complement to the PGA Reach Foundation's goal of keeping kids in school and occupied with the game.

"We hope golf can have a positive influence on their young lives, and we see the city's only championship as a great way to advance that goal."

With Rector's help, the championship is not only back, but it's better than ever. The entry fee, which jumped to \$135 in recent years, has been lowered to the original \$125. Previously, the championship could accommodate only 90 players. This year, it will welcome more. Prospective competitors will be able to go to the Forest Park website (www.forestparkgc.com) to download the entry form.

"Jeff did not want to raise the fees, he was insistent on that," Collida said. "With all the tournaments in town now, it's tough on players to be able to find it in their budget to play in all of these things. Jeff knows that, and he wanted to keep the entry fee where it was."

The fees have been reduced, but not the spoils. As before, championship week includes a Par 3 Tournament, emulating the Masters Tournament format. A championship dinner will take place at Forest Park on Friday evening, Aug. 28, followed by 36 holes of play on Saturday and Sunday. Winners in each division get \$525 in gift certificates, while the Par 3 champ gets \$125 in value.

No sooner did word get out the championship was back than the winners of 2013 in each division contacted Collida, wanting to know if they got a rain check on their automatic exemptions into the 2014 championship. Indeed, Patrick Riordan (Regular), Dave Estes (Senior) and Gerald Moser (Par 3) will be comped.

Collida has had to change the date a couple of times, to avoid bumping up against other events on the hyperactive St. Louis golf schedule. His only concern now will be preparing the golf course for the championship. It's true, dirt still has a few years on Collida. But he will turn 85 in September and he doesn't make the pivot quite like he did at St. Louis U. High.

"I'm getting so damn old, I'm just worried about being able to go out and mark the golf course," he said with a laugh. "People don't realize the things you have to do to get a golf course ready for something like this. I could use somebody to help paint the lines or something."

Lines and all, the championship is back.