

## Tournament Report

# In a Class of His Own

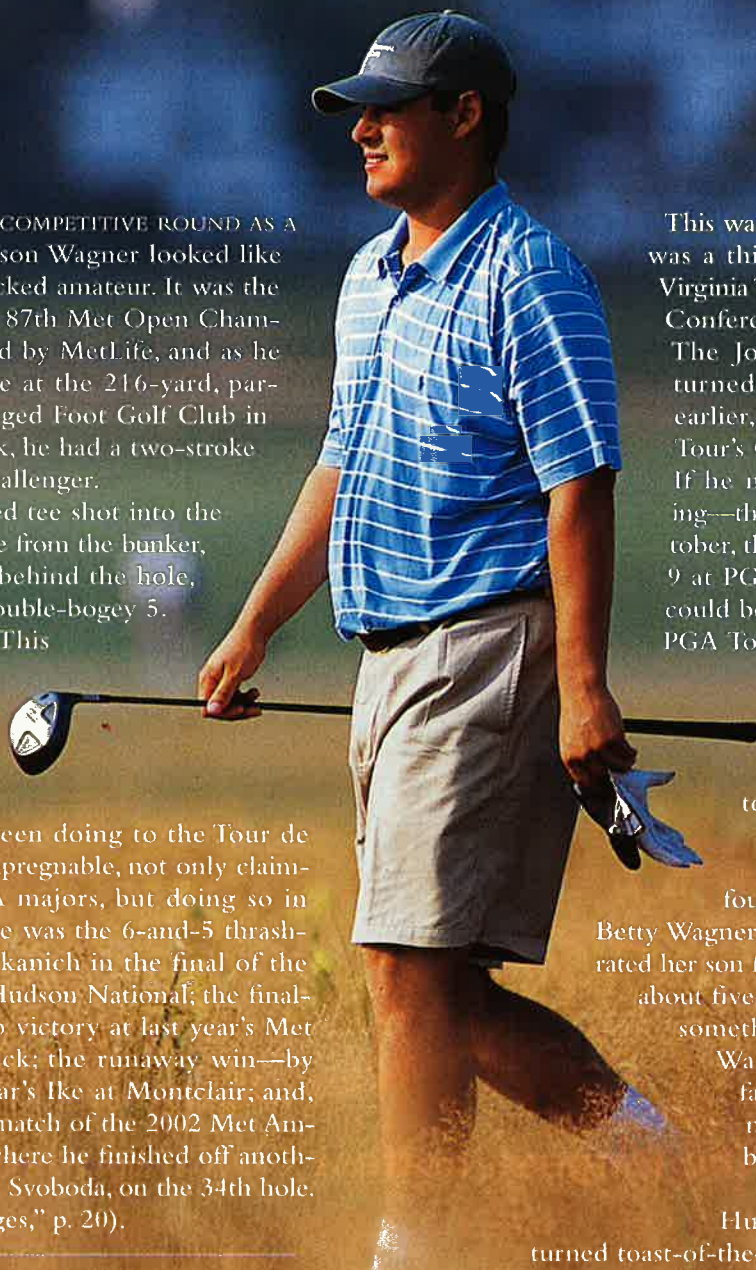
*Johnson Wagner notched his fifth straight MGA major with a victory at the Met Open, and completed the calendar-year MGA Slam. His next stop? The PGA Tour's Qualifying School* **By Alan Bastable and Richard J. Cerame**

**I**N JUST HIS THIRD COMPETITIVE ROUND AS A professional, Johnson Wagner looked like a typical nerve-racked amateur. It was the final round of the 87th Met Open Championship presented by MetLife, and as he stepped to the tee at the 216-yard, par-three third hole at Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, New York, he had a two-stroke lead over his nearest challenger.

Then came the pulled tee shot into the sand, the line-drive blade from the bunker, the deftless chip from behind the hole, and the two-putt for double-bogey 5.

But wait a minute. This was Johnson Wagner, the 22-year-old who has been doing to Metropolitan Golf Association majors what Lance Armstrong has been doing to the Tour de France. He has been impregnable, not only claiming the last four MGA majors, but doing so in lights-out fashion. There was the 6-and-5 thrashing of young Jack Skirkanich in the final of the 2001 Met Amateur at Hudson National; the final-round 66 on his way to victory at last year's Met Open at Bethpage Black; the runaway win—by eight shots—at this year's Ike at Montclair; and, most recently, the final match of the 2002 Met Amateur at Piping Rock, where he finished off another local prodigy, Andrew Svoboda, on the 34th hole. (See "A Run for the Ages," p. 20).

Wagner stood tall above the competition at the 100th Met Amateur at The Piping Rock Club in early August.



This was the Johnson Wagner who was a third-team All-American at Virginia Tech and the 2002 Big East Conference individual champion. The Johnson Wagner who had turned professional just a week earlier, his sights set on the PGA Tour's Qualifying School this fall. If he makes it through qualifying—three stages, the first this October, the final stage December 4-9 at PGA West in California—he could be the next real deal on the PGA Tour.

He was the man to beat at Winged Foot, a king to dethrone. No one had expected him to beat himself.

Of course, he wouldn't. After a tap-in par at the fourth, a passing remark from Betty Wagner revealed what most separated her son from the field. "It takes him about five to seven minutes to forget something like that," she said as Wagner strolled up the fifth fairway. In other words, he is not only loaded with talent but unflappable, too.

Sure enough, the former Hudson National caddie turned toast-of-the-club ran off three straight birdies—4-3-2 on his scorecard—beginning at the

par-five fifth, to broaden his advantage to four strokes over the only real challenger, his playing partner Rob Labritz, a 31-year-old club pro from GlenArbor in Westchester County. "Johnson plays with no fear," said Labritz, who played in the PGA Championship in August and also plans to attend Q-School. "He reminds me a lot of the Tour players already out there."

While Labritz was steady, he made the turn exactly where he had begun: three strokes behind Wagner. And with just one birdie on the back nine and a fate-sealing double-bogey on the 449-yard, par-four 17th, he could not orchestrate a final push, finishing five strokes back, alone in second place.

Wagner, the only player to card both his first two rounds in the 60s, had begun the day with the opportunity to become the first player to win all three MGA majors in the same year and the first to win the Met Open both as an amateur and as a professional. And to do so on one of the country's legendary layouts. "With everything I've done and



won this year, I put a lot of pressure on myself to win," he said. "I was nervous."

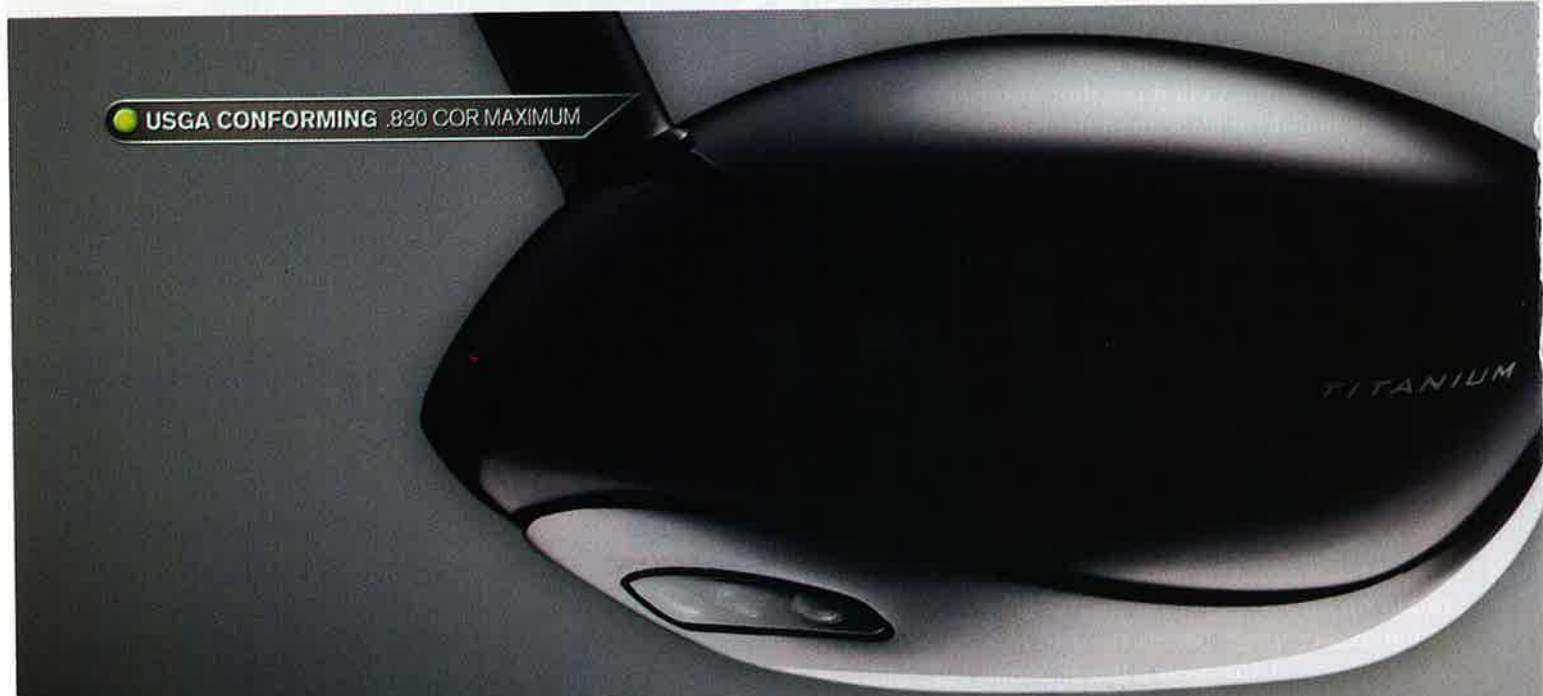
With the exception of that double bogey, however, he never showed it, striking exacting irons through the swirling winds with Rolex-like consistency. He matched his birdies on the

front nine with a pair on the back: at the par-four 11th and the 535-yard par-five 12th. "I hit the ball well today under the toughest conditions by far," he said after closing bogey-bogey for an even-par 70. "I would have liked to have had all my rounds in the 60s, but a win's a win." And \$23,000, the first-place prize, is \$23,000.

Mark Mielke, the head pro from Mill River, also posted a final-round 70 to finish in a tie for third with Trump National's John Nieporte (son of Winged Foot head pro, Tom) at three-over-par 213. Adam Fuchs of Hamlet Windwatch G&CC was the low amateur, finishing tied for 15th at 220.

Among the top amateurs absent from the field (because the timing of the event conflicted with the U.S. Amateur) was 22-year-old Svoboda, a friend of Wagner's and a member of the host club. "[His play] didn't surprise me," said Svoboda, who was home in time to watch Wagner's final round after missing qualifying for match play at the U.S. Amateur in a playoff. "I brought him out here

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last Wednesday to see the course [for the first time], and he shot 66 while bogeying the last two holes.

"I definitely think he's capable of taking it to the next level," continued Svoboda, the reigning Westchester Amateur champion. "He's got every shot: he hits the ball long and straight, he's a good putter, has a good short game—and he has a great attitude."

Svoboda should know. Just three weeks earlier he had squared off with Wagner in the final of the 100th Met Amateur Championship at The Piping Rock Club on Long Island.

That Svoboda and Johnson would lock horns in the final match was hardly a surprise. Svoboda, a star on the St. John's University golf team, had fired a six-under-par 136 (70-66) in on-site qualifying to earn the number one seed in the match-play portion of the championship. Meanwhile, Wagner's rounds of 72-66 notched him the No. 2 seed—and an intriguing first-round match with five-time Met Amateur champion George Zahringer III of Deepdale.



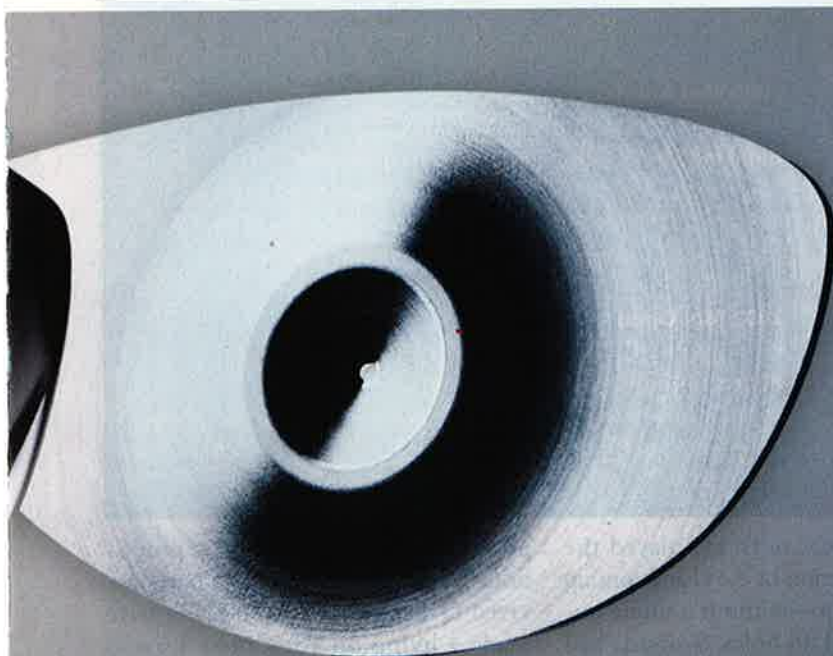
Svoboda (left) battled hard at Piping Rock, while Labritz (above) brought a well balanced game to Winged Foot, but neither could keep up with Wagner.

Zahringer, 49, is the only other golfer to have captured the Met Amateur and Met Open crowns in the same season

(1985), and he had more victories in the Met Amateur than all of the 16 match-play qualifiers combined. In what may have been the final determinant in the recent changing of the guard in the Met Area, Wagner posted six birdies to close out the match on the 14th hole by a 6-and-4 margin. He continued to sizzle in his afternoon quarterfinal match with a 5-and-3 win over 33-year-old Mark Thompson of Plandome.

Day two brought one of the most anticipated semifinal matches in recent years: Wagner versus 20-year-old Martin Catalioto of Darlington, the youngest player among the final 16 and one of the hottest. The two-time MGA Junior champion and sophomore at Clemson University was coming off a 4-and-3 quarterfinal win over veteran Jerry Courville Jr. of Shorehaven, a three-time Met Amateur winner and the 1995 U.S. Mid-Amateur champion.

Catalioto clawed his way to a 1-up lead through eight against Wagner, but he faltered with bogeys on the ensuing three holes and was never able to re-



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cover, eventually falling 3 and 2.

On the other half of the bracket, Svoboda advanced to the semis with come-from-behind wins in the first and quarterfinal rounds over 2002 MGA/MetLife Public Links champion Peter Meurer of Silver Lake and 2002 Ike runner-up Allan Small of Fairmount, respectively. This set the table for a semifinal between Svoboda and the reigning New Jersey Amateur champion Corey Brigham of Rumson. As he had done in his previous two matches, Svoboda fell behind early, then picked up steam as the match progressed. Down two through 12, Svoboda managed to draw even by the 15th, then birdied the final hole to win.

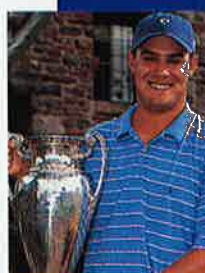
Although Wagner headed into the 36-hole final as a heavy favorite, he remembered the last time he'd met Svoboda in a match-play event. "He beat me on the 11th hole at the MGA/MetLife Boys Championship at Bedford back in '95," Wagner said. "He clobbered me then, but I hope I can last at least 11 holes this time!"

Svoboda took the first hole with a birdie, but it would be his only lead of the day. He stayed 1-up until a bogey on the eighth and a birdie from Wagner on Piping Rock's par-three ninth suddenly had him 1-down. Wagner added birdies at 11 and 13 to go 3-up, but Svoboda gritted his teeth and birdied the final three holes to draw even with 18 still to play.

Both players started the afternoon sluggishly, missing a number of makeable birdie attempts on the first four holes. As they came to the turn, Svoboda hit poor tee shots on Nos. 8 and 9 and lost both holes, then lost the 10th to a birdie that equaled Wagner's biggest lead of the match at 3 up.

Svoboda missed perhaps his last chance to get back in the match when he was unable to birdie the par-four 13th after nearly driving the green. Wagner eventually closed out the match 3 and 2 after he and Svoboda matched pars on 14, 15, and 16.

For Wagner, it was another commanding performance on another of the



## A RUN FOR THE AGES

Before Johnson Wagner came along, not a single player had won more than two consecutive MGA major championships. Wagner steam-rolled his way through five straight, four as an amateur, the last as a professional. Here's a closer look at each of his victories.

### 2001 Met Amateur

Hudson National GC, Croton-on-Hudson, NY

**Final match:** Defeats Jack Skirkanich of Rumson CC, 6 and 5  
*Shoots 68-67 in on-site qualifying—"The best back-to-back rounds of my life," he says—to finish eight shots clear of the next qualifier.*

### 2001 Met Open

Bethpage State Park (Black Course), Farmingdale, NY

**Score:** 68-72-66-206 (four under)

*Begins the final round six shots off the pace, then cards a 66, four shots better than anyone else in the field, to eclipse runner-up Rick Hartmann by three strokes. Says a shell-shocked Hartmann, "I got my butt kicked."*

### 2002 Ike

Montclair GC, West Orange, NJ

**Score:** 72-66-65-203 (seven under)

*Breaks the 54-hole Ike scoring record by three strokes, a mark previously held by current PGA Tour pro Michael Muehr. "I can't describe it," Wagner says of his final 36 holes. "Every shot I hit I pretty much knew where it was going. I've never really felt that way."*

### 2002 Met Amateur

The Piping Rock Club, Locust Valley, NY

**Final match:** Defeats Andrew Svoboda of Winged Foot GC, 3 and 2  
*He plays the final 48 holes of match play without a single bogey. "This is the absolute best I have ever hit the golf ball in my entire life," he says. "The scary thing is that I putted pretty awful all week."*

### 2002 Met Open

Winged Foot GC, Mamaroneck, NY

**Score:** 69-68-70-207 (three under)

*In his first tournament as a professional, he is the only player to finish under par. "I just hope he gets his Tour card," jokes Long Island pro Mark Mielke, "and gets the heck out of here."*

Met Area's great tests. He played the match-play portion of the championship in 20 under par—without a single bogey in his final 48 holes. Svoboda had played the final in three under par, but it wasn't enough. "I played well," Svoboda said, "but you just can't make mistakes against him. He's too good."

But how good is he really? Can he handle the competition, let alone the pressure, at Q-School? The Met Area has

produced plenty of promising professionals over the years, but few have survived Q-School, and even fewer have made a living on Tour. New Jersey's Michael Muehr and Jim McGovern, and Connecticut's J.J. Henry are the most recent exceptions. And while none of their records on the Met Area circuit are nearly as impressive as Wagner's, it's a different game at the top. Will Wagner's game match up? Stay tuned. 