

Tournament Report

In a Class of His Own

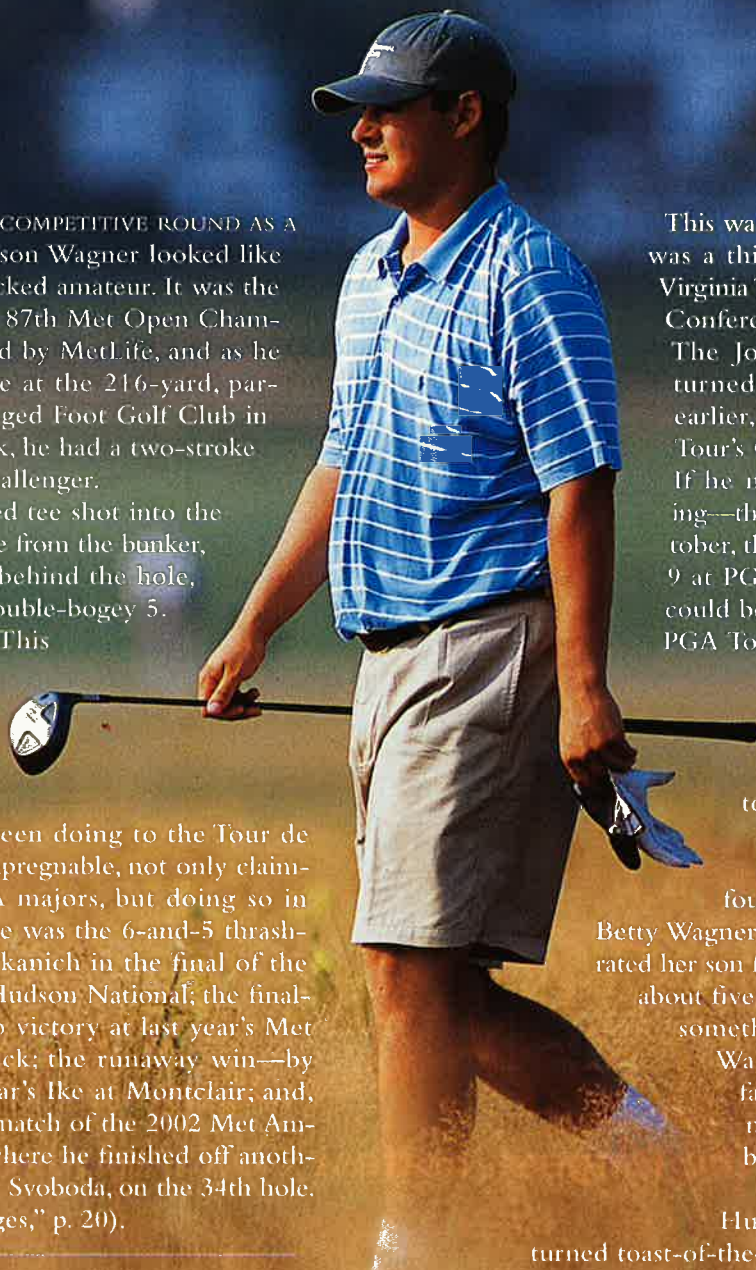
Johnson Wagner notched his fifth straight MGA major with a victory at the Met Open, and completed the calendar-year MGA Slam. His next stop? The PGA Tour's Qualifying School **By Alan Bastable and Richard J. Cerame**

IN 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."

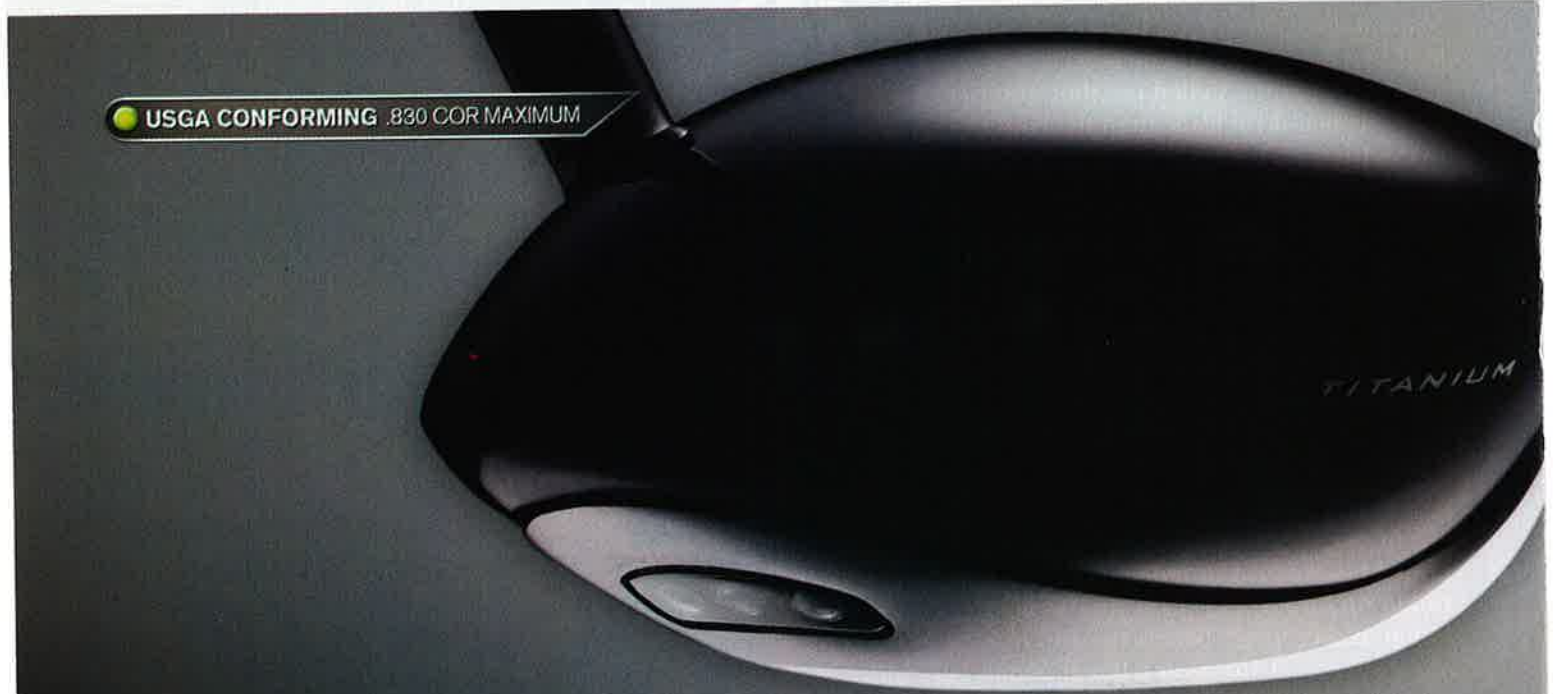
With the exception of that double bogey, however, he never showed it, striking exacting irons through the swirling winds with Rolex-like consistency. He matched his birdies on the

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

LC LAMBRECHT (2)



It's the longest, hottest COR, longest, most forgiving,



Tuned Weight Cartridge

The R500 is the longest driver allowed by the USGA's final ruling. That's the fact. Here's the science: Inverted Cone Technology. By meticulously milling the back of the clubface our engineers spread the USGA's legal limit COR all over the front of the face. So even mishits go farther down the fairway.

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.



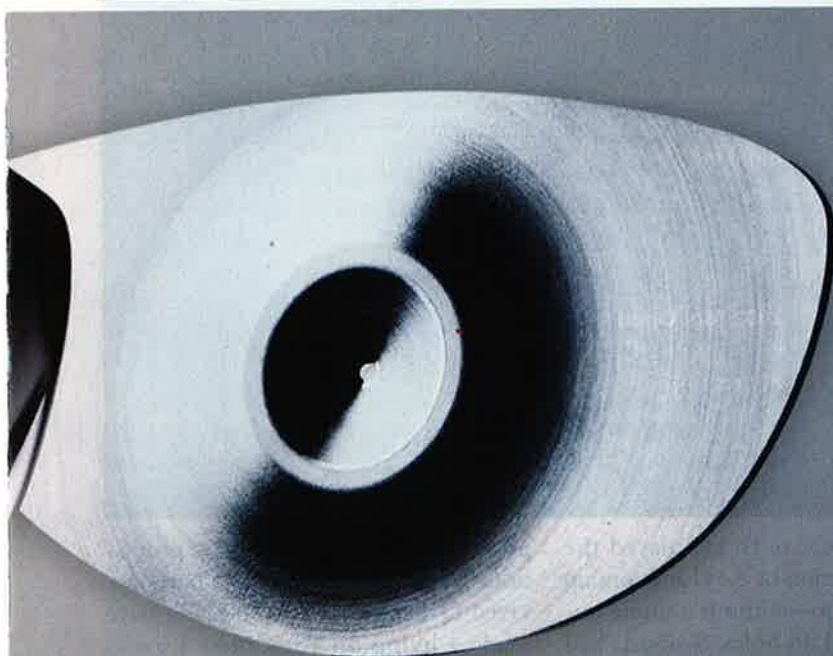
Svoboda (left) battled hard at Piping Rock, while Labritz (above) brought a well balanced game to Winged Foot, but neither could keep up with Wagner.

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-



Power from the inside out.

R5
HUNDRED
SERIES

longest, purest feeling, longest driver you can play.

All three R500 Series drivers also feature the Tuned Weight Cartridge. It matches your shaft and your clubhead with your swing. For your perfect launch angle and spin rate. And longer, straighter walks from the tee box. Inside and outside, the R500 is the most advanced driver ever created.

TaylorMade