



Regarding Henry

Met Area native J.J. Henry's steady rise on the PGA Tour was capped by a dream season in 2006

BY JOHN STEINBREder



His mother said it was going to be like this. “She knew J.J. was one of those guys who hangs back a little bit until he feels comfortable, and then lets his talent come to the surface,” says his longtime caddie and childhood friend, Matt Hauser. “I’ve heard her say that many times before.”

Apparently, his father has said such things as well.

“I think it was all a matter of his feeling more and more at ease out there,” Ron Henry explains. “J.J. has been that way in every step of his golf career. He got good at one level and achieved what he could there before moving up. He has never gotten ahead of himself, and now he’s coming into an age where golfers reach the top of their potential. Most players mature in their early 30s, and J.J. is there right now.”

J.J. would be J.J. Henry, the 31-year-old Fairfield, Connecticut native who stands 6’3” and is finishing up a year that demonstrates he is indeed “there,” and then some. He not only won his first PGA Tour event this year (the Buick Championship at the TPC at River Highlands in his home state) but also finished second at the FBR Open in Phoenix and amassed a total of five top-ten finishes by

Henry won the Buick Championship in July (inset), then joined Tiger and the rest of the U.S. team in August for a pre-Ryder Cup practice session.

The 2006 U.S. Ryder Cup team, with J.J. Henry fifth from the left.



GETTY IMAGES

Labor Day weekend. By the first week of September, he had accumulated just over \$2 million in prize money, nearly double his previous career high for an entire season (\$1,073,847 in his rookie year of 2001).

Of course, all these accomplishments allowed Henry to attain an even greater honor – making the 2006 U.S. Ryder Cup team, one of a heady squad of 12 that includes Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson. The team competed last month at The K Club in Ireland, and J.J. played admirably. He halved all three of his matches, earning 1 1/2 points for the U.S. squad. He did not flinch at all under the pressure, and in fact came through with several crucial shots that were praised by his teammates and U.S. captain Tom Lehman [see sidebar, below].

Playing on a Ryder Cup team is an extraor-

inary honor for the man who learned the game at The Patterson Club in Fairfield, teaching it up most of the time with his father, an accomplished golfer in his own right who runs an insurance and real estate company and who played in six British and two U.S. Amateurs. And it did more than put an exclamation point on what has obviously been a career year. It also represents one of the best seasons a Met Area player has ever had on the PGA Tour, and locals would have to go back to players with names like Sarazen and Boros to remember a campaign during which one of their own performed so well.

“While he never won an MGA event as an amateur, you could always see the potential, and no one around here is surprised to see J.J. reach this level,” says MGA Tournament Director Gene Westmoreland. (Henry was a finalist in the 1994 Met Amateur and runner-up in the 1997 Ike.)

“I feel great, I am playing with a lot of confidence and I am excited to be on the Ryder Cup team,” Henry, who joined the PGA Tour in 2001, said in August. “It’s the biggest thing that has happened to me in golf, and I am thrilled.”

Henry has had a lot of thrills this year. After missing cuts in his first two tournaments of 2006, he turned in the second-place finish at the FBR, carding a 61 in his second round. A string of middle-of-the pack finishes followed, and he then vaulted himself into contention again in April, at the BellSouth Classic outside Atlanta. Those high finishes had been his best showings since a T-3 at the 2004 Southern Farm Bureau Classic, and injected Henry with confidence.

It all came together the week of the Buick, the tournament he used to watch as a kid, spending hours at the range of the Cromwell, Connecticut track and dreaming of the day he would be hitting balls with the pros. “And the nice thing is, I really did win it,” he says. “It didn’t fall into my lap. I grabbed it and played

J.J. at The K

Setting aside the disappointment he felt from seeing his team lose 18 1/2 - 9 1/2 at the 36th Ryder Cup, J.J. Henry was in good spirits as dusk fell over The K Club following the conclusion of the matches.



His singles match against Ireland’s Paul McGinley was an instant classic. With the European team’s victory close at hand, McGinley conceded a 25-foot birdie putt to Henry on the 18th hole to halve.

“I think it shows what the spirit of this competition is all about,” Henry said afterward. “We had a great match; we were neck and neck virtually the whole way.”

Before play began, the big question was how Henry and the other three U.S. rookies would hold up to the dual pressure of

international competition and playing on Europe’s turf. Stewart Cink, who partnered with Henry for both of his fourball matches, was confident.

“He’s playing great,” said Cink. “J.J. is playing about as well as anybody on our team right now.”

Henry’s good form carried over to both of his fourball matches, against Paul Casey and Robert Karlsson. Henry stuck approach shots close, made clutch up-and-downs and sank important putts to help secure a half-point in each of the matches.

Considering the less-than-stellar play of such U.S. Ryder Cup veterans as Phil Mickelson (1/2 point) and David Toms (1/2 point), Henry’s play is deserving of praise. It bodes well that this Met Area native will be a stalwart of many future Ryder Cup teams.



Clockwise from top: Henry, 19, accepts the finalist trophy at the 1994 Met Amateur from former MGA President John Baldwin; with his father, Ron, after J.J. won the '94 Conn. Amateur; posing with his first PGA Tour card, in 2000.

well. I had a two-shot lead going into the final round, and I was very relaxed and focused, and very determined to win.”

Yet not even that milestone victory could top the two days he spent in Ireland at the end of August with his Ryder Cup teammates. “It really gave me the sense that I belonged,” Henry says. “And how can hanging out with Tiger and Phil not help my game?”

Perhaps he is right, but Henry had taken his game to a different level long before he was hanging with those guys, and he attributes his successes on the golf course this year to simple maturation and development.

“Technically, I became more of a complete player in 2006,” Henry says. “But that is not so much a question of practicing more or finding a certain technique that worked. Rather it’s a matter of playing on Tour always being a learning process. I knew it would take time, and I have always tried to be realistic about that. There are not that many top players in the U.S. under the age of 30. It takes time to learn to play against the best players in the world. I believed it would happen because I have had success on every level of golf, from winning the Connecticut State Amateur three times to playing at TCU (where he was first-team All-American in 1998 and *Golfweek’s* Co-College Player of the Year) and winning on the Nationwide Tour.”

As evidenced by his \$1 million-plus in earnings back in 2001, Henry had early success on the PGA Tour. In fact, he was the first rookie to earn \$1 million in a season, which placed him 49th on the money list that first year. “But he underachieved a bit after that and developed something of a top-125 attitude,” recalls caddie Hauser. “That means J.J. was playing more to keep his card [which he would have lost had he dropped below 125 on the money list] than he was to win.” He never did lose his card in five seasons – no small feat. But he still had yet to play to his full potential.

All that changed in 2006, and J.J.’s father Ron has marveled at the results of those improvements. “I can see how his win at Hartford gave him a good dose of confidence, and then he had top-tens at Firestone and the Deutsche Bank at the end of the summer,” he says. “Earning a spot on the Ryder Cup in the middle of all that shows that he deserves to be a part of it. He’s a part of the club now, the club of elite players, and I am curious to see where he goes from here.”

Maybe to places few Met Area players have been before. ■

John Steinbreder is a senior writer for *Golfweek*. He lives in Fairfield County, Connecticut.

