



On Big

to the Leagues

Four years after carding the best season in MGA history, Johnson Wagner is prepped for his debut year on the PGA Tour

BY RICHARD J. CERAME

Johnson Wagner won't be offended if you don't recognize his name on the pairing sheets, or perhaps even the leaderboard, at the Sony Open in Hawaii, which gets underway January 11. In fact, that's probably the way he'd prefer it. It might allow him to remain beneath the radar for a little bit longer.

However, that's not likely to continue once PGA Tour galleries get a glimpse of the impressive game that Wagner's fellow Nationwide Tour competitors became accustomed to seeing in 2006. The 26-year-old's breakout season, his fourth on the PGA Tour's developmental tour, was highlighted by two victories and a second-place finish on the Nationwide money list. In addition to earning \$372,069, the former Garrison, New York resident finished in the top 10 in 11 statistical categories – including first in both total eagles and birdies.

The Wagner Plan

Bobby Heins was happy when Johnson Wagner joined the Nationwide Tour in 2003. As Wagner's swing coach, Heins relished the opportunity to help the budding talent prepare for what he saw as an inevitable career on the PGA Tour.

Heins likens Wagner's game and demeanor to current PGA Tour star Chad Campbell. "Johnson's a natural player, so we don't get worried too much about technique and ball positions," says the 55-year-old Heins. "It's all about impact and creating

quality golf shots."

The two get together in person only a few times a season but speak on the phone at least a few times each week. They often discuss what attitude and mindset brought Johnson the greatest success on the course. Mentally that means maintaining Wagner's relaxed, confident manner without compromising his aggressive style of play. "We've worked on hitting aggressive shots, but not hitting them aggressively," Heins explains. "That's when Johnson plays his best golf."
—RJC



Wagner is a strong player who has a knack for hitting big shots in crunch time.

Wagner's success hardly comes as a surprise to Met Area golfers who witnessed his unprecedented run of five straight MGA major championships in 2001 and '02 — one Ike, two Met Amateur and two Met Open victories (the latter his first event as a professional). After all, he won his Met Opens at Bethpage and Winged Foot, two major-quality venues. What did come as a surprise, mostly to Wagner, was that his two-year dominance in the Met Area didn't initially translate to the same success on the Nationwide Tour.

"Johnson's comfort level changed drastically during his rookie season on the Nationwide," says Bobby Heins, head professional at Old Oaks in Purchase, New York and Wagner's instructor. "He went from being nearly unbeatable for two years to competing against 120 guys each week who played at the same level as him. He quickly realized the need to improve his game on every level." (See sidebar, above).

Although he steadily climbed up the money list in each of his first three seasons on the Nationwide Tour (120th in his rookie season, 42nd in 2004 and 36th last year), Wagner didn't reach the winner's circle until his fourth event this year. When the time came, he did so with a dramatic flourish, making birdie from a fairway bunker on the 72nd hole to top off a final-round 67 and win the Chitimacha Louisiana Open in March by one stroke. His second victory came in August at the Cox Classic in Omaha, Nebraska, and was every bit as exciting as his first. A final-round 63, highlighted by an eagle-birdie finish, led to a four-stroke win.

At that point it looked as if Wagner might earn a coveted "Battlefield Promotion" — an automatic entrée to the PGA Tour for anyone with three Nationwide Tour wins in one season. Perhaps he tried a bit too hard for it, because after that second win Wagner was unable to muster a top-10 finish for the remainder of the season. Still, he accomplished his longtime goal of making it to "the show." He made it to the final stage of Q-School the last four years but came up empty, and is



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thrilled to not have to go back.

Similar to Hollywood's best actors, Wagner is always quick to credit his strong supporting cast — both on and off the golf course. Always a solid ball striker with the ability to make birdies in bunches, the former Virginia Tech standout's success on the course can be traced primarily to an improved work ethic and short game. Much came as a result of Johnson's '06 partnership with veteran Tour caddie Steven

Hale, who caddied in the late eighties and early nineties, most notably for Billy Andrade. As valuable as Hale's input has been on the golf course — particularly on the greens — his greatest contributions come after the duo walk off the course. "Steven has really pushed me to stick around after each round and continue to improve every area of my short game," says Wagner. "His positive influence helped change my attitude as well as my game."

Wagner's best friend and former Hokie teammate Brendon de Jonge, himself a Nationwider with conditional status on the PGA Tour next year, is also quick to point out the difference in his friend's game since Hale's arrival. "Steven has helped Johnson breed a new level of confidence in his game, especially after they got that first win," says de Jonge. "And confidence is everything out here."

Off the course, Johnson has the support of a family deeply rooted in golf. Johnson's grandfather and namesake, M.T. Johnson, was a former USGA treasurer and his older brother, T.J., played collegiate golf for Washington and Lee. T.J. played a big part in getting his brother acquainted with the rigorous demands of life on Tour, caddying for Johnson his first two seasons on the Nationwide before moving back to Charlotte to start a family. But the two brothers weren't separated for long. Johnson married his college sweetheart, Katie, in July and the two purchased a home and moved to Charlotte this fall. The newlyweds are also joined in town by Johnson's parents, Betty and Tom, as well as de Jonge and his wife.

For someone with his future shining so brightly, Wagner is still eager to point out his toughest road only lies ahead. "I'm ready for the next step but I'm not going to let that narrow my focus," he says. "I still have to improve." He'll try to build momentum early by entering all of the Tour's West Coast events to begin the '07 season. But even if his confidence wavers early, it's safe to say he has a strong supporting cast to lean on for help. ■

Richard Cerame writes about golf from his home in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.



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