

Where have all the birdies gone?

Maciejewski/Van Erman take home HoJo Trophy at Inaugural Lake Park Invitational.

August 19, 2010

MILWAUKEE – There were no galleries. No television cameras. No sponsor exemptions. Heck – there weren't even flags for the last three holes.

But that didn't matter.

For the 12 inspired men invited to take part in championship golf's fifth and newest major, the night of Aug. 18 wasn't about glory or fame or money.

It was about the "HoJo."

Appropriately named to honor the original man to sign its leather, the HoJo Trophy was to be presented to the two men who could combine to best the other 10 in a competitive, but gentlemanly, game of scramble golf. On the hallowed grounds of Lake Park in Milwaukee, the 12 men convened at 5:30 p.m. and, after impatiently waiting for 15 minutes for the two players who mid-judged the length of their commutes, set out to the first tee. One small boy could be overheard asking his father, "Daddy, are those golfers?"

"No, son," was the reply. "They're pioneers."

The tournament's first foursome – which included the Dan Maciejewski/Phil Van Erman pairing and tournament founders Matt Wessel/Chris Milewski – set an ominous tone for the rest of the night when all four tee shots were either short, long or sideways. Both pairings managed to save par, making way for the second foursome – Ben Wessel/Mike Wessel and Chris Stolarski/Andy Brodzeller, also known as "Team 10" – to start their rounds. "Team 10," picked by some to compete for the HoJo, opened their round with a three. "I have my name on my balls," said a proud Brodzeller.

The Wessel twins dug themselves an early hole that they would never quite recover from, netting a five on the opening hole – just one stroke away from the dreaded six.

"It was all Mike's fault," said his twin. "For the past 15 minutes I've been wondering if he would even show up. Do you know how nerve-racking that is? Finally he shows up, dropped off in this shady looking black car, runs into another car to change, then comes running up to the tee. Our heads just weren't in this thing at the start."

The final foursome of the evening was Marco Aliperta/Dave Parker and Matt Templon/Dan Voors. It was rumored for weeks that Voors – in true Tin Cup style – might bring only his putter. But in the end he played with a wedge, as well.

"Yeah, I'm glad he ended up bringing more than one club," said Templon after the tournament was over. "But it really didn't matter. We still used most of my shots."

About an hour later, as the groups approached the turn, the six-group tournament had turned into more of a three-team race. Maciejewski/Van Erman held a slim lead at one-under, just ahead of Wessel/Milewski's even par and Stolarski/Brodzeller's plus-two. The Wessel twins were struggling at plus-six (despite hitting three birdies), Templon/Voors was also at plus six and Aliperta/Parker were bringing up the rear at plus-something.

"We just came for the beer and burgers afterwards," said Aliperta when asked about his score at the turn. "Speaking of which, I'm starving. Let's ea– Wait, what? What do you mean we have nine more holes?"

As "Team 10" hovered around plus-two, unable to snap their string of pars that started on hole four and continued through the rest of the round, Wessel/Milewski knew it would be up to them to challenge the front-runners. On Hole #15, with the first three shooters failing to hit the green, Wessel stepped up with a chance to make a move.

He failed. His shot skied to the left and rolled off the green.

"It was a pretty bad shot," said Milewski. "I thought that was the tournament right there. In fact, I remember telling everyone that we might as well stop playing."

But, as luck would have it, Wessel's ball was found to be miraculously just on the fringe, setting up an easy par to best Maciejewski/Van Erman's bogey.

The group then approached Hole #16 – which at this time had no flag – all tied up. While Wessel/Milewski both struck green on their tee shots, Maciejewski/Van Erman weren't as fortunate. Maciejewski's tee shot went way left and Van Erman, well, his shot never left the tee box. Swinging as if he were in a sand trap, Van Erman made contact with the ground three inches behind the ball, drove his club into the ground and struck a root. The ball never moved. Quick to point out the rules of the tournament, Wessel gladly let Van Erman know that he had to play the rest of the hole without benefit of socks or shoes.

But "Shoeless" Phil was not to be shaken. He calmly stepped up to Maciejewski's errant tee shot and put the ball within two feet of the hole, setting up a par putt from his partner. With Wessel/Milewski unable to make birdie, the group remained tied heading into Hole #17.

After watching Wessel's tee-shot fly about 150 yards past the green, Milewski stepped up and stuck his drive five feet from the cup (of course, he didn't know it at the time since there was no flag on the green). Keeping the momentum going, Milewski stepped up and nailed the birdie putt, giving his team a one-shot lead with one hole to play.

Needing just a push on 18 to win, Milewski and Wessel watched as Van Erman and Maciejewski both missed the green. Milewski stepped up and hit a solid 50 yard pitch. The problem was that the hole was 80 yards long. Wessel then stepped up with a chance to play hero and promptly hit a ball into the pine trees past the green.

"My partner really let me down today," said Milewski. "I mean, he had some good putts early on, but when it mattered most, he shit the bed."

"Right. Never mind that I single-handedly kept my team in the game for the first 15 holes," replied a clearly annoyed Wessel. "Maybe if my partner would have learned to use his wedge before ten minutes ago we wouldn't be in this position."

Despite the frustrating tee shots, Wessel/Milewski were still in good shape, needing only par to win. But a beautiful putt by Maciejewski from off the green gave his team an easy par, putting pressure on Wessel/Milewski to sink their six-foot par putt. As expected, they failed. They took a four on the hole and seemed destined for a one-hole playoff.

Just to be sure, the group watched the others finish their rounds. "Team 10" needed a hole-in-one to join the playoff, which didn't happen. But Stolarski did put the ball within 10 feet of the pin, which would go on to stand as the closest ball to the pin. Stolarski took home an unopened Dave Stewart baseball action figure (with commemorative coin) as a reward for his marksmanship.

"This might be the coolest thing I've ever won," said Stolarski when presented with his award. "Screw the HoJo Trophy. Someone just told me this has a book value of \$30. Thirty bucks!"

"Who's Dave Stewart?" he added.

The Wessel twins improved slightly to finish at plus-five, finishing a disappointing fourth for the tournament.

"Next year I'm not playing with Ben," said Mike Wessel.

"Good," replied his twin.

After them it was Aliperta/Parker and Templon/Voors, finishing at plus-10 and plus-six, respectively.

"I'm not going to lie. I felt like I was playing with one eye out there," said Voors, motioning to the black eye he sustained last week when he closed his mitt too early on a play at first base. "Have you ever tried to judge the distance of a hole with one eye? It requires weally, weally gweat depth pewception."

With wegulation – er, regulation – complete, it was time for a one-hole playoff. Rules dictated that both members of each team play the entire hole on their own, with the best combined score taking home the HoJo. Neither man was able to hit the green with his tee-shot, so it was

pretty much still even after the first stroke. But while everyone else hit the green with their second shot, Wessel decided to just “chip it closer.”

“In hindsight, it was the wrong strategy,” admitted Wessel.

To add insult to injury, his third chip went over the green, ensuring Maciejewski/Van Erman of the coveted HoJo Trophy.

“It was at that point I knew we had won,” said a gleeful Van Erman, referring to Wessel’s errant chip. “I mean, I knew we were going to win weeks ago when we scheduled this thing. I win my family’s golf tournament every year, so I was just really confident that I’d be awesome today.”

When asked what he thought about the win, Maciejewski muttered, “Can we talk later? My back is killing me from carrying our team all day.”

With the round behind them, the 12 “pioneers” retreated to their cars and embarked on the long, three-minute journey back to the Wessel compound where they feasted on meat, booze, fritos, star crunches and a heavy dose of “*It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*.”

“It was nice to see Matt step up to the plate and grill for once,” said Parker, still bitter from being forced into grilling duties at the Wessel/Milewski co-bachelor party. “I didn’t think he had it in him.”

Had there been any witnesses to Wednesday’s epic tournament – and there were none – they would have forever remembered the grace with which no one played, the skill of which no one really showed and the etiquette with which no one displayed. Still, a tradition has been born. These 12 men will surely meet again to once again challenge themselves and each other to see who shall be the rightful owner of the HoJo.

For the time being, it rightfully belongs to Maciejewski and Van Erman.

NOTE: Tournament officials told Maciejewski that he must change his last name prior to next year’s tournament if he wishes to participate ... preferably to something like “Smith.”

FINAL RESULTS:

E * Maciejewski / Van Erman
E Wessel / Milewski
+2 Stolarski / Brodzeller
+5 Wessel / Wessel
+6 Voors / Templon
+10 Aliperta / Parker
* *Won by two shots on a one-hole playoff (Hole #1).*

“Longest Putt” (Hole #9)	Milewski
“Closest to the Pin” (Hole #18)	Stolarski
# of balls lost	0 (shocking)
# of birdies	8
# of double-bogeys	4
# of greens hit in regulation	Maybe 20? (out of 216)
# of golfers that had to pay	5
Start time – 5:46	End time – 7:38
Temperature – 76 degrees	