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By Dennis LaLiberty

CUITINO'S FIRST TIME VICTORY IN THE 2018 CHAMPION OF CHAMPIONS IS A FAMILY AFFAIR

On a picture-perfect day for early fall golf Ryan Cuitino of Morris Country Club, Morris, IL, emerged the winner by one stroke after a three-hole playoff to record his first win at the Champion of Champions tournament. Not only was it Cuitino's first victory in the tournament but it was the very first time he played the Park Ridge Country Club course.

At the completion of regulation there were three players tied for the lead at 2 over par: Cuitino, Kevin Vernick of Olympia Fields CC and four-time champion Terry Werner of Briar Ridge CC (also holder of the tournament record low round of 65). The three-hole cumulative score playoff, the sixth in the 21 years since Park Ridge became the tournament host, began at the 5 par 10th hole, with all three players recording par, then moved to the 209 yard par 3 17th. Cuitino's tee shot came up 5 feet short of the green and a testy little chip left him a 5-foot putt, which



*L-R: Terry Werner [Briar Ridge],
Kevin Vernick [Olympia Fields],
Ryan Cuitino [Morris]*

he sunk for his par. Werner's tee shot was on the green, pin high, 20 feet from the hole. His first putt just barely missed, leaving a one-footer, which he made for his par. Vernick's drive found the left sand bunker, leaving him a long bunker shot, which he executed well to 8 feet from the flag, but his putt for par was slightly off line, leaving him one stroke back with bogey.

As has so often happened in tournament history, it all came down to the 18th hole, a 440-yard double dogleg 4 par, with two players tied and one just a stroke behind. Vernick, whose tee shot found the left rough, with overhanging tree branches precluding going for the green, lagged his second shot to the fairway about 90 yards away, thereby making an even par score in question. Next to hit, Terry Werner uncharacteristically saw his 180-yard iron shot drift right and land in the RH green-side bunker, leaving a long and testy shot to a back right flag. Cuitino, hitting last from the center of the fairway 160 yards out, played conservatively to the green, but left himself an uncomfortably long 40-foot putt, albeit uphill. Vernick's third shot was pin high but nestled down in the high grass to the right of the green, and when his chip for par slid 3 feet past, he was almost certainly eliminated. Next was Werner whose bunker shot came out long to leave a slippery 30-foot putt for par. Cuitino, after carefully assessing his lengthy birdie putt with his caddy, proceeded to hit it to within a foot, and when Werner's long putt for par slid by, Cuitino completed his tap in par for his hard-fought victory.

The three playoff competitors arrived to that point in differing ways. Vernick stumbled badly with a triple bogey 7 on the first hole, then played the remaining 17 in one under par. Cuitino made bogey at the 600-yard, par 5 third hole, and at the par 3 fifth, whose green so often proves to be 3 putt territory. Werner, as usual in his workmanlike fashion, played a steady round initially, including a sole birdie on the long third hole, but caught a bad break when his errant tee shot on the par 4 thirteenth hole nestled next to a tree, thus requiring a punch out to leave him a third shot 180 yards out. In between clubs, Werner's ultimate choice left him short in the left sand bunker, and when his sand shot left him some 12 feet away, his putt slid away, resulting in a crushing double bogey. This was followed by a bogey on the 183-yard fourteenth hole when his tee shot left him in the high rough just off the green and his chip ran some 18 feet past the flag. Werner missed the comebacker to go two over for his round and, to his credit, maintained that position through Park Ridge's tough "Last Mile," the four long and difficult holes which so often determine the tournament winner.

And there we were: three players for a three-hole playoff, but only one winner.



*Veronica and Ryan
Cuitino*

There were a number of firsts in this year's championship. In addition to Cuitino's first year victory and first time playing the course, at 30 years of age he is the youngest winner during the Park Ridge era of hosting the tournament. Perhaps more interesting, this is the first time when both the player and his caddy are club champions. Cuitino's caddy is

the reigning Morris Country Club Women's Club

Champion and she is also his wife. The couple first met in Minooka, IL, at the local high school, and while Ryan played college golf at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, Veronica Cuitino played on the women's golf team at Eastern Illinois University. Ryan is not exactly a stranger to Park Ridge since he was born in Edison Park and lived there as a youngster until the family moved to Minooka, but he had never seen Park Ridge Country Club until today.

After a chilly beginning to the day, with temperatures in the low 50's, the day turned out to be close to perfect, with cloudless blue skies initially and a temperature that soon climbed into a mid- to high 60's comfort zone. Later, a few light clouds accented the skies and a southeast breeze added a touch of coolness and probably added one or two strokes to most scores. The course was in immaculate shape and scrapbook pretty thanks to a sun angle which enhanced the green grass, the trees whose leaves were just beginning to turn, and the aforementioned "Carolina Blue" of the sky. As usual, the greens came in for praise from many of the competitors, even though their slopes and subtle breaks made life more than a little difficult for some of the field. Greens Superintendent Joel Purpur and his crew did their typical fine job in grooming the course to its absolute best for the competition.

All other aspects of the tournament were handled efficiently and with the Park Ridge Club's traditional friendliness, including registration and on-course score updating. The work of the golf professional and food and beverage staffs exemplified both their experience in handling the event and the welcoming attitude which makes for a memorable day for both previous and new competitors. A special note of recognition goes to Club member Jim Kennedy, who did double duty, first as the official greeter as competitors arrived to the bag drop, then subsequently as the Walking Scorer for the winner, Ryan Cuitino. Ryan and Veronica Cuitino made certain to thank Jim for his encouraging presence and to get his commitment for service next year when Ryan returns to defend his title.



Veronica and Ryan Cuitino and Jim Kennedy [PRCC]

Chicagoland's *Champion of Champions* invitational golf tournament for men was first played in 1933, and was held annually at various clubs until 1984. Park Ridge CC reinstated the tournament in 1998 and has hosted it annually ever since, with the exception of 2001 when the course was closed for remodeling (it was played at Medinah #1). Since 2017 the tournament has an official new name, "The Richard E. Peterson Champion of Champions," honoring PRCC Club member Rich Peterson, who was the driving force in reviving the event and bringing it to its now permanent Park Ridge Country Club home. The traveling trophy to be displayed at the home club of the winner, and now known as the "Peterson Trophy," was donated by the Western Golf Association (WGA).

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