

RALLY CAPPED

Max Buckley needed late-season heroics to capture his first MGA Player of the Year title.

BY A.J. VOELPEL



It wasn't quite the abruptness of a game-winning grand slam with two outs in the bottom of the ninth, nor the unlikelihood of a Hail Mary touchdown as time expires. But it was that thrilling, as Max Buckley's superb performance at the Nassau Invitational—in the final week that MGA Player of the Year points are awarded—produced a come-from-behind victory in one of the tightest Player of the Year races in recent memory.

Needing at least a runner-up finish to overtake Pat Wilson of Andover, N.J., atop the Polo Golf MGA Points Standings, Buckley, 24, capped off his finest MGA season with four straight match-play wins en route to the Nassau crown and the Jerry Courville Sr. Player of the Year award.

"I sort of knew what I had to do, but you can drive yourself crazy thinking about different scenarios, different point calculations," said the mild-mannered Buckley, who graduated from SMU last January. "My mindset going in was to win the golf tournament. I can only control what I do, not what Pat does."

A native of Rye, N.Y., Buckley spent most of the year demonstrating his capacity for clutch play. For those unfamiliar with his game, it's one that almost invariably delivers down the stretch of tour-

naments. (Like Michael Jordan did when floating to the basket for the Chicago Bulls, Buckley also has an instinctive habit of peeking his tongue out when delivering a blow.) His flair for the dramatic first appeared in Ireland this past April, as a member of the MGA's Carey Cup team. Playing in the penultimate singles match on the final day of competition, Buckley fought back from a 3-down deficit with four holes remaining to win, ensuring the MGA would retain the Cup.

"That really gave me a great jump start to my season," he said.

When Buckley arrived back on American soil, he edged Wilson, a Met Area standout for several years and 2013 St. John's University graduate, on the first sudden-death playoff hole to win the New York City Amateur. A month later, after finishing T-6 at U.S. Open sectional qualifying and recording his second consecutive runner-up finish at the Ike, Buckley birdied the first hole in a three-man playoff to take home the Mittelmark Invitational at Fenway.

Buckley's great play came as no great surprise. He entered the season having made the past three Player of the Year Honor Rolls, composed of the top 10 players in the POY standings. It was clear

from the get-go, however, that he was seeking the top spot in 2013.

"When I sat down with my coach [Gary Weir] at the beginning of the year, this was one of my main goals," said Buckley, who plays out of Westchester Country Club in Rye. "Once I won a few tournaments and put myself in that position, I felt more and more comfortable in tight situations, and that's something that really helped me."

He is now in elite company, joining his victorious Carey Cup and USGA State Team members Mike Miller and Joe Saladino—who won four of the past five Player of the Year awards between them—as players who have demonstrated the poise and consistency to claim the Met Area's most coveted honor.

"There are a lot of great names on that Player of the Year award list, and to join them is pretty special," Buckley said.

Buckley did so despite holding the points lead only for a brief stint in late July. That's because Wilson was out recording more top 10s than David Letterman. The 23-year-old also started the season hot, collecting points for high finishes in the NYC Amateur (runner-up), Ike (7th), NJSGA Am (7th), Mittelmark (10th) and NJSGA Open (7th). It wasn't until Buckley finished third at the Westchester Open and won July's Arcola Cup that he finally gained an advantage in the standings, heading into the 111th Met Amateur at Stanwich.

A mouthwatering championship scenario arose after both players qualified for match play, on opposite sides of the draw. However, Buckley fell to Trevor Randolph



in 21 holes in the Round of 16, and it was Wilson who convincingly took down the MGA's premier match-play event. It was his biggest victory to date and swung the standings back in his favor with only a handful of events remaining. It also created a dilemma as to whether Wilson would turn pro prior to the Met Open. He decided to remain an amateur and continue his run for Player of the Year. Game on.

Wilson and Buckley both received qualifying and on-site cut points for the Met Open. Wilson's third-place finish in the Boff Invitational, where Buckley finished 10th, extended his lead to 60 points heading into the Nassau Invitational. When Wilson came up one stroke short of qualifying for match play, he figured that he was in trouble.



"It was a little disappointing end to the season to say the least," Wilson said. "I didn't have the explosive rounds I had last year, but there were still a lot of positives. I certainly matured quite a bit—almost winning Player of the Year, and getting the Met Amateur was huge. It turned an okay summer into a really good one in just a week."

Wilson turned professional on October 26, at a gathering of friends and family at his home club of Panther Valley G&CC in Allamuchy Township, N.J. He plans to go to Florida and compete in Hooters Winter Series events as well as the Q-Schools for the PGA Tour Canada and PGA Tour Latinoamérica.

"Max is a really good player," Wilson said. "He did what he needed to do. It was a deserving win."

It was also one of the most closely contested races in the award's history: In the past 20 years, only Ron Vannelli's 24.5-point victory over 10-time Player of the Year George Zahring III in 2005 was tighter than Buckley's 40-point edge over Wilson.

The Honor Roll

Final standings for the 2013 MGA Jerry Courville Sr. Player of the Year award

Pos.	Name	Club	Points
1	Max Buckley	Westchester CC	860
2	Pat Wilson	Panther Valley G&CC	820
3	Sam Bernstein	Century CC	805
4	Joe Saladino	Huntington CC	598
5	Ryan McCormick	Suburban GC	538
6	Trevor Randolph	Arcola CC	523
7	Cameron Young	Sleepy Hollow CC	511
8	Dylan Crowley	Glen Cove CC	483
9	Matt Lowe	Colonial Springs GC	435
10	Michael Stamberger	Spring Lake GC	418

"We had a good rivalry all summer," Buckley said. "Pat played spectacular golf, especially at the Met Am. It was a tight race till the end."

Buckley also has his sights set on turning pro, likely next August. His goal is to prep himself with Web.com Tour Monday qualifiers and another full slate of regional, national and international events. He plans to take some time off before starting again in January with the Australian Master of the Amateurs and Australian Amateur—his father, Ian, is a native Australian.

"I'm heading down there for six weeks," Buckley said. "It's going to be nice to have a little downtime and enjoy what I accomplished this season." ■

Max Buckley (above and top of opposite page) triumphed at the Nassau Invitational to overtake Pat Wilson (bottom of opposite page) for the 2013 Jerry Courville Sr. Player of the Year award.