

Sweet Repeat

Mike Miller expanded his horizons in 2012 and came away with a second consecutive MGA Player of the Year

BY A.J. VOELPEL

Not a lot appears to have changed with Mike Miller over the past year. In fact, the similarities are striking. At first glance, there's his youthful appearance—most notably the hair that still overflows out of a U-brimmed Titleist cap. There are also his drives, which are still *too* straight and *too* long. And there's his name, once again added to the list of winners of the MGA Jerry Courville Sr. Player of the Year Award.

Yet despite the many similarities, the 20-year-old from Knollwood Country Club took a huge leap forward this season. While he didn't dramatically alter his game, he did seek out opportunities to test that game farther from home, entering more national (and international) events than at any time in his career.

Following a winter in which he spent time playing and practicing at Broken Sound Country Club in Florida, Miller joined many of America's best amateurs in mid-April at the Terra Cotta Invitational in Naples, Fla., and tied for second. Later that month, he traveled to Europe for the first time

and played in two prestigious events: the Lytham Trophy at Royal Lytham and St. Annes (where Ernie Els won the 2012 Open Championship) and the Irish Amateur at Royal Dublin Golf Club. Having never stepped foot on a links course in his life, he tied for fourth in both tournaments.

"Mentally, it made me feel that I can play with the best of the best," he said. "Because I went there with no experience, somewhere I've never been before. When I got back from Europe, I was on cloud nine."

Closer to home, Miller earned his first 50 Polo Golf MGA Player of the Year points by finishing as the co-medalist in U.S. Open Local Qualifying at Trump National-Westchester. He then finished second in the New York City Amateur, losing in a playoff to a fellow 20-year-old, Ryan McCormick of Suburban. McCormick, a junior at St. John's University, would have his own monster year, and he and Miller developed a friendly rivalry that lasted right up through the end of the season.

Another common opponent (and friend) of



Miller's was 15-year-old Cameron Young of Sleepy Hollow, who shocked Miller by defeating him in the 2011 Westchester Amateur. Miller avenged that victory this year and pocketed another 125 points in the process. Shortly after, he finished second at the esteemed Sunnehanna Amateur in Pennsylvania, one of the most acclaimed tournaments on the summer circuit. Due to the strength of that field, he was awarded 75 bonus points and climbed all the way to No. 32 in the World Amateur Golf Rankings. His confidence was at an all-time high.

"There's no doubt playing in our area helps me when I play in national tournaments," Miller says. "There are so many good players in our area that can go low at any time. You have to play your best to win."

Next up was the Ike Championship at Atlantic, where Miller finished a respectable fourth, and the Westchester Open, where he tied for fourth and was second low amateur. At this point Miller was leading the MGA Player of the Year race, but would have to wait a couple more weeks to earn more points in what would be an epic showdown with McCormick.

The two were paired together during 36-hole stroke play qualifying at the Met Amateur (August 2–5) at Hollywood Golf Club in Deal, N.J. Feeding off each other, both opened with sensational 6-under 65s in the first round, and of course it would only make sense that they'd meet again, this time in the semifinals. In a brilliant match that went all 18 holes, McCormick would get the best of Miller again, winning 1-up in what was arguably the finest display of golf the

entire season (in fast and windy conditions, Miller played a bogey-free 2-under round... and lost).

"He's such a great player," Miller says of McCormick. "Not only is he a good friend, which is always the worst part about being competitors, but on the golf course he just elevates my game because he hits it so well. He really had a phenomenal year."

Yet Miller's consistent play all season gave him a slight edge over McCormick in the points standings despite that Met Amateur loss. And just a week later, Miller went on to qualify for match play (for the second time in three years) and win his first-round match at the U.S. Amateur at Cherry Hills Country Club outside of Denver, earning 175 points. This gave him a 240-point buffer over McCormick entering the Met Open at



Left: Joe Saladino, Max Buckley, and Miller celebrate after winning the 2012 USGA Men's State Team at Galloway National. Below: Miller and Ryan McCormick developed an exciting rivalry in 2012.

Plainfield, and he needed every bit of it as McCormick nearly won the championship. Miller finished 10th, third low amateur, and collected 175 to maintain a slim lead.

As the calendar flipped to September, Miller morphed into a vintage version of Mariano Rivera and closed out the season by dominating the individual portion of the USGA Men's State Team Championship at Galloway National Golf Club in New Jersey,

2012 MGA Player of the Year Honor Roll

Pos.	Name	Club	Points
1	Mike Miller	Knollwood	1,330
2	Ryan McCormick	Suburban	1,010
3	Brian Komline	Black Oak	752
4	Joe Saladino	Huntington	665
5	Cameron Young	Sleepy Hollow	644
6	Pat Wilson	Panther Valley	560
7	Mike Stamberger	Spring Lake	533
8	Sam Bernstein	Century	505
9	Max Buckley	Westchester	465
10	Ben Smith	MGA eClub - N.J.	403

by eight shots, and capturing the Boff Invitational at Essex County Country Club just three days later.

"Besides winning the Player of the Year and Met Am, winning the State Team is definitely my top accomplishment," he said. "Not only did I win individually, but we won as a team. Playing with Max [Buckley] and Joe [Saladino], they really made me believe I can do it. I give them a lot of credit."

Miller's 1,330 Polo Golf MGA Player of the Year points are the most since Jerry Courville Jr. finished with 1,367 in 1997, and he is the first repeat winner of the award since Courville did it in '02 and '03. He is firmly enshrined now as the area's top amateur, and perhaps one of its best ever.

So where does he go from here? No one has ever won three MGA Player of the Year titles in a row, and Miller says most of his focus will be on making the team for the Walker Cup matches, which will be held at the National Golf Links of America next September. But he is likely to enter next season just as he did this one: with an easy smile, an unwavering confidence, and a game that has the potential to take him as far as he wants to go. ■

Carried by a long game that was hitting on all cylinders and a positive attitude of self-belief, Mike Miller distinguished himself among a strong group of Met Area amateurs.