

Time Well Spent

A deeper dedication to improving his game paid off for **James Nicholas**, the 2017 MGA Jerry Courville Sr. Player of the Year. **BY TIM HARTIN**

Golf hasn't always been the top priority for James Nicholas. Growing up, there wasn't a team sport in which he didn't compete, leaving only summer evenings for a quick nine holes or time on the par-three course at Westchester Country Club alongside his grandfather or father, the two who introduced him to the game. But through the years, the sport he enjoyed in his spare time has become his greatest passion, leading to a heightened focus on golf and ultimately his rise to 2017 MGA Jerry Courville Sr. Player of the Year.

"Playing all these different sports and training all these different muscles in my body to do different things really helped me with my golf game to a certain extent," said the 20-year-old Nicholas, who grew up in Scarsdale. As he entered high school, Nicholas planned to play lacrosse in the spring. However, after breaking his collarbone in football and again in hockey, he opted for golf in order to give himself a rest from contact sports.

"I ended up making it to the state championship that year and that's when I was like, you know, this is kind of fun, I think I want to keep doing this," Nicholas said. He continued the football-hockey-golf cycle through high school and as a senior in 2015 earned All-State recognition in all three sports while also winning the New York State high school golf championship.

While highly recruited for Division I hockey, Nicholas chose to attend Yale and play football and golf. In the meantime, he showed flashes of his potential in golf, even playing just several months a year. He was runner-up in the Met Junior in 2015, and logged a top-10 finish at the Ike Championship in 2016.

Following his freshman year at Yale, Nicholas decided to put football aside and concentrate his efforts on golf alone—something his first coach Barry Troiano and current coach Gary Weir had proposed in year's past. "I finally said this is going to be the year where I try to push myself to see if I can get good enough to compete with

the guys around the Met Area," said Nicholas.

For the first time he played golf year-round. "Gary had a great plan for me over the winter," said Nicholas, which involved focusing on his backswing to put himself in position to attack the ball with no swing thought. "That kind of stuck with me the whole summer since I ingrained it during the winter."

In addition to his regimen with Weir at Westchester, Nicholas went to Florida a few times a month, training at instructor Jim McLean's facilities while also working on his mental game. He had a feeling he was in for a good summer after making the cut in the Irish Amateur Open at Royal County Down. "I came into the summer with a really strong game, much stronger than it's ever been," said Nicholas. "Usually in past years I wouldn't have touched a club the entire winter."

He began collecting Player of the Year points with a run to the semifinals of the Westchester Amateur. He led the Hochster Memorial before a final-nine 40 dropped him into a tie for third, and Nicholas took the positive from the experience, saying, "That was disappointing, but it made me realize that I could compete with these guys and really push toward winning something."

The next week he tied for fifth in the MGA's first major of the season, the 62nd Ike Championship at Century. This strong performance built his confidence and led him and his coach to a

realization. Says Nicholas, "Obviously, [winning Player of the Year] was a goal of mine, but it was never a realistic goal until the first couple weeks where Gary was like, 'Hey, you progressed a little faster than we thought, and you actually have a shot at this.'"

The thought grew stronger when he won the Arcola Cup by three strokes and made the cut in both the Westchester and New York State Opens, where he earned low amateur and third-low amateur finishes.

He opened August by tying for fifth in stroke play qualifying for the 115th Met Amateur Championship at Laurel Links Country Club, then advancing to the semifinals in the second major of the season, earning him another 150 points. Matt Mattare, who won the Met Am and had runner-up finishes in both the New Jersey Mid-Am and the Ike as well as a win at the GAP Open, stood more than 150 points ahead of Nicholas.

His schedule hit a slight blip on August 8, when his opening round at the New York State Amateur (at Bethpage Black) and the weather-postponed MGA Father & Son Championship (at Edgewood Country Club in River Vale, N.J.) fell on the same day. The Father & Son holds no weight in the Player of the Year race, but Nicholas treasures the golf relationship with his father and the two



Clockwise from top left: At the WGA Amateur in June; competing at Laurel Links during the Met Amateur (center); at the Met Open at Hollywood in August; receiving the Low Amateur prize at the WGA Open; reading a putt with younger brother Brian at Laurel Links; at the Ike at Century.

were defending champions. He managed to secure favorable tee-times, figuring, "If I played a really quick round at the State Am, I could make it just in time for my tee time with my dad." He did just that, and he and his father, Stephen, fired 8-under 64 in the Pinehurst format to win the event for the third time overall. "It was just a really special experience," said Nicholas, who returned to Bethpage and tied for eighth in the State Amateur. "I wasn't going to miss that for the world, so I was happy I could do both."

Nicholas then went west for his first-ever appearance in the U.S. Amateur, which he qualified for in July. He posted a 69 at Riviera and 72 at Bel Air to easily advance to match play. He lost in the first round, but nonetheless cites it as one of the biggest sports accomplishments he's made so far in his career. His parents' and family's presence in L.A. added to the emotion, and Nicholas later said of the season overall, "I couldn't have done it without them. Just going out there and knowing I have them supporting me, it means the world." The performance was worth another 125 points, earning him a slim 16-point lead on Mattare.

His final point opportunity before returning to school came in the 102nd Met Open at Hollywood Golf Club. Nicholas put his focus on the championship alone, setting aside the points race to