

# Pal Joey

*A quick start and steady play throughout the season propelled Joe Saladino to the MGA Player of the Year title*

BY BOB NIELSEN

**T**he competitive golf season in the Met Area hits the ground running before all the leaves return to the trees, with a number of prestigious events in April and May. Joe Saladino of Huntington Country Club typically plays in many of these spring tournaments, and his success over the past few years has made him one of the premier amateurs in the Met Area. Never has this been the case more than in 2008, when Saladino won or finished runner-up in four of the first six events he entered en route to his first MGA Jerry Courville Sr. Player of the Year Award.







Saladino was able to pull ahead of Quagliano (above) for Player of the Year thanks to a controlled, rhythmic full swing (below) and impressive greenside touch (opposite page).

Saladino set the tone early with a win at the Havemeyer Memorial at Long Island's Southward Ho Country Club in early May. He followed that up a week later with a runner-up finish at the Travis Invitational, an event that annually draws several top amateur players from across the country to Garden City Golf Club. This fast start was a continuation of Saladino's strong play toward the end of the 2007 season, when he notched wins at the Mittelmark Invitational and Long Island Amateur Stroke Play. With his dedication to fitness and a refreshingly positive outlook, he carried that momentum into 2008.

"I try to keep it simple, work on my swing a little bit and just try to get better," said Saladino of his off-season practice. "I finished off

well in 2007 and I was hitting the ball great, so my expectations were high for 2008."

Those expectations continued to rise as the calendar turned to June and Saladino placed fifth at the Long Island Open, held at Bethpage State Park's Red Course. By mid-June, the Player of the Year race was being dominated by Saladino and Michael Quagliano of GlenArbor Golf Club. Quagliano, the captain of the Duke University golf team, finished second at the New York City Amateur and qualified for the U.S. Open at Torrey Pines, allowing him to surge ahead of Saladino and

take his share of the spotlight.

However, a two-week stretch from June 14 through June 28 saw Saladino grab the lead back from Quagliano with a win at the Hochster Memorial at Quaker Ridge and a runner-up showing at the Long Island Amateur. Despite Quagliano's fifth-place finish at the Ike Championship, Saladino would never again fall out of first place in the year-long points standings. In mid-July, he finished third at the New York State Open at Bethpage Black, a tournament with a field second only to the Met Open.

Saladino chalks his success up to his winter preparation and a more holistic approach to competitive golf. Saladino is the co-owner, along with his brother Don, of Drive 495 in SoHo, a fitness club which focuses on golf-centered workouts and proper nutrition.

"As I've gotten older I focus more on time management and getting the most out of everything," said Saladino. "I use what we are teaching here [at Drive 495] and I've been working on my fitness and nutrition in addition to the traditional golf workouts."

After graduating from St. John's University in 2002, Saladino turned professional and tried to play on the mini-tours in Florida. He quickly realized that the life of a tour professional was not for him and decided to pursue reinstatement to amateur status. He recalls that his mindset changed after his return to the amateur ranks and golf, even competitive golf, became a more social activity. No longer was he grinding it out to make a paycheck. Instead, he enjoyed the great championship venues of MGA and Met Area events and the fellowship of the players.

"I've met a lot of great people out here over the past few years," said Saladino. "It's not

about making a cut every week, it's about having fun and, honestly, it's helped my game."

Nowhere was this new attitude more evident than at the 2008 Met Amateur at Friar's Head, the spectacular Crenshaw-Coore layout in Baiting Hollow, N.Y. The buzz about Friar's Head had been building among the players all summer, and Saladino would make the most of his appearance.

After finishing second in the 36-hole stroke play qualifying portion of the championship, Saladino won three matches and advanced all the way to the 36-hole final, where he took on 2006 Met Amateur champion Tommy McDonagh of Shorehaven Golf Club. Despite the 6 & 5 loss, it was Saladino's best career performance in the Met Amateur and got him an additional 200 player of the year points—making him virtually uncatchable.

Saladino finished the season by playing in his fourth U.S. Amateur (1999, 2000 and 2006) and finishing second at the Long Island Amateur Stroke Play Championship. His impressive season earned him a selection to the MGA team that competed in the French-American Challenge at Metropolis Country Club in October. Saladino finished with 1,117 points, 265 ahead of Quagliano, and was the first player to earn more than 1,000 points since 2003.

Despite the continued presence of college players on the Met Area golf scene, Joe Saladino was able to parlay his experience, talent and attitude to achieve the ultimate recognition for playing performance. He is



now part of an elite group of players who have proven themselves to be among the top amateurs in the country. He has taken his game to a whole new level and, at 28 years of age, it's doubtful he is done improving. ■

## Story of a Season: How He Won

Event	Finish	Points
Havemeyer Invitational	Won	75
Travis Invitational	Runner-up	75
LIGA Open	5th (low amateur)	120
Hochster Memorial	Won	125
Ike Championship	Exempt (made cut)	25
LIGA Amateur	Runner-up	90
New York State Open	3rd (low amateur)	220
U.S. Amateur	Qualified	50
Mittelmark Invitational	T-2nd	62
Met Amateur	Runner-up	200
LIGA Amateur Stroke Play	2nd	45
Boff Invitational	T-6th	30
<b>Total</b>		<b>1,117</b>

