

TWO FOR THOMAS

Jeff Thomas just keeps getting better and better, having won his second consecutive Player of the Year title in record style

by Peter Morrice

This has been a year like no other for Jeff Thomas. It started with a practice round for the Masters with Arnold Palmer—Thomas' appearance at Augusta National resulted from his victory in the 1993 U.S. Mid-Amateur Championship—and ended with his earning the highest honor an amateur golfer can receive in the Metropolitan Area. Along the way, Thomas went from being a dominant local performer to a contender on the national stage.

Thomas, who plays out of the Plainfield West Golf Course in Plainfield, NJ, mixed his usual gritty style with some new-found confidence this year to capture his second straight MGA Player of the Year Award. And although he won only one major local tournament, the New Jersey State Amateur (his eighth since 1981!), Thomas swept past his 1993 record-breaking point total during the dog days of August. Final tally for 1994: 1,311 points, 133 better than '93, and more than 300 better than his nearest rival, Edward Gibstein of Engineers Country Club. Thomas claimed the title because he was consistent from round to round, tournament to tournament. "It used to be that if I started with a few bad holes, I would blow up and have a bad round," Thomas explains, "but now a slow start actually makes me play better—it makes me concentrate."

It seemed that Thomas was never off the leaderboard this summer. He



Ten top-10 finishes propelled Jeff Thomas to the top of the MGA Player of the Year standings.

tied for second in the MGA/MetLife Public Links Championship, reached the semi-finals of the Met Amateur, and finished low amateur, tying for eighth, in the Met Open. In all, he posted 10 top-10 finishes in tournaments that counted toward the Player of the Year standings.

In addition, Thomas reached the third round of match play in defense of his U.S. Mid-Amateur title, advanced to the second round of the U.S. Public

Links Championship, and climbed as high as seventh in the Titleist/Golfweek National Amateur Rankings. He also finished second in the Mid-Atlantic Amateur and tied for fifth in the Northeast Amateur, demonstrating once again that his talents stack up quite nicely outside the Met Area. "This has been the steadiest year I've ever had in golf," he says. "Playing in national events, against strong fields, in front of big crowds has helped me to become better focused. This last year has taught me a lot about trusting my game."

Internationally, Thomas partnered with Malcolm Smith of Huntington Crescent Club, who finished fifth in the Player of the Year rankings, to capture the International Team Championship in Lima, Peru (Thomas placed second individually), and he competed on this year's MGA/WPGA team in the French-American Challenge for the fourth time (see "Local Knowledge," page 10).

But the Player of the Year race was not all Thomas, all year. In the early going, Greg Bisconti of Westchester Country Club won the Westchester and New York City Amateurs, and Gibstein picked up victories in the Richardson Memorial and the Ike. Gibstein also reached the quarter-finals of the U.S. Amateur and the semi-finals of the U.S. Mid-Amateur (see "Head of the Class," page 34) but Thomas had a stranglehold on the rankings by mid-summer.

Shorehaven's Jerry Courville, Jr., also got into the hunt with a victory in the Hochster Memorial and a second-place finish in the Ike, which he led through the first two rounds of the 54-hole event. Courville also won two matches in the U.S. Amateur and notched late-season victories at the Boff Invitational and the prestigious Crump Cup at Pine Valley, but his point aggregate was good enough only for third.

In a very real sense, this was a tough year for Gibstein and Courville to "put up the numbers." Their point totals of 987 and 973, respectively, would have won the Player of the Year Award in six of the last nine years. But Thomas had his eyes on the prize and now has his name in the record books. Again. ■

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