

THOMAS ON TOP

Jeff Thomas put together what may be the best year of his stellar career

by Jay Mottola

For nearly two decades, Jeff Thomas has been a dominant force among Met Area amateurs. Since he won the first of a record eight New Jersey Amateurs in 1981, Thomas has finished at or near the top of the MGA's Player of the Year point list. However, 1996 was special even for Thomas, and with what may have been his best season ever, he captured his third Player of the Year title in four years.

To say that Thomas got off to a "good" start in 1996 would be like saying Tiger Woods got off to a "good" start on the PGA Tour. Thomas burst from the blocks in May by capturing his second straight Travis Memorial at Garden City. Later that month he captured the New York City Amateur by a mere 10 shots over a strong field at La Tourette on Staten Island. You could sense early on that 1996 was going to be something special.

In early June, Thomas failed to extend one of his most impressive records when he finished second in his quest for a record ninth New Jersey State Amateur title. It didn't take Thomas long to get over the setback however, for the next day he started play against a stellar national field at the Sunnehanna Amateur in Johnstown, PA. Thomas went on to capture this prestigious title with a one-shot victory over U.S. Amateur runner-up Steve Scott. June proved to be Thomas's month, for two weeks later at Metedeconk National he finally broke through and captured an MGA major. For all his victories in the Met Area, Thomas had never captured a Met Amateur, Open or Ike title. But his second-round 70 over the rugged Metedeconk

layout helped propel him to a big lead, which he held down the stretch for a one-shot win over Ed Gibstein and a coveted victory in the Ike, the MGA's stroke play championship.

His early season play had built a huge lead in the Player of the Year standings but he wasn't done yet. In July he traveled to Wailua Golf Course in Kauai, Hawaii and came within one match of earning his second national title. Winner of the 1993 U.S. Mid-Amateur Championship, Thomas reached the finals of the 1996 U.S. Public Links before losing to Tim Hogarth of California.

The season wasn't all Thomas, however. The 1995 Player of the Year, Jerry Courville Jr. of Shorehaven, had another great year and Met Amateur champion Ken Bakst brought his game to new heights. Courville, who lost in the finals of the Met Amateur to Bakst, played his way to a prestigious berth on the World Amateur Team. He was one

of only four male amateurs scheduled to represent the U.S. in Manila, in the Philippines this past November. Jerry's year was highlighted by fine play at the U.S. Amateur where he lost to Tiger Woods in the second round, and at the U.S. Mid-Amateur—in defense of his 1995 title—where he was on-site qualifying medalist and won two matches. Bakst, who plays out of Sunningdale Country Club and Atlantic Golf Club, coupled consistent play throughout the year with victories at the Hochster Memorial at Quaker Ridge and the Boff Invitational at Shackamaxon, as well as his impressive victory over Courville in the Met Amateur final at Nassau to produce his best year ever.

Fairmount's Allan Small, who was the model of consistency throughout the year; Edward Gibstein of Engineer, the runner-up in the Ike and semifinalist in the Met Amateur, and collegiate star J.J. Henry from The Paterson Club rounded out the top five in the final 1996 Player of the Year standings (see "Scoreboard" on page 30).

The year belonged to Thomas, though. His season finished with trips to the U.S. Amateur and Mid-Amateur and spots on the MGA's international teams, which traveled to France to play the Ligue de Paris, and defeated the Golfing Union of Ireland at Hudson National Golf Club. His outstanding play from May to October truly made it a player of the year season. ■

Jay Mottola is MGA Executive Director.



Thomas, here at the U.S. Public Links, got off to a fast start and never looked back.