



Jerry Courville Sr. Player of the Year

# Never Too Late

*At 57, New Jersey's Ron Vannelli surprised even himself with his remarkable run of excellent play in 2005* | BY CHRIS FREEBURN

IT'S BEEN A VERY GOOD YEAR FOR Metuchen Golf and Country Club's Ron Vannelli. The 57-year-old real estate broker from Edison, NJ, reached the third round of the U.S. Senior Amateur Championship, tied for second at the MGA Senior Open, tied for eighth at the MGA Stroke Play (The Ike) and qualified for both the U.S. Mid-Amateur and the U.S. Senior Amateur Championships. Finally, as if all that were not enough, he also won the area's biggest event, the Met Amateur, and was named the MGA Jerry Courville Sr. Player of the Year. Not bad for a guy who didn't start playing golf until he was 24 and didn't play his first tournament until his early 30's. "I didn't expect it," Vannelli says of his surprising 2005 season.

A graduate of New Jersey's South Plainfield High School, Vannelli didn't discover golf until returning to New Jersey after college at the University of Kentucky. "A friend talked me into coming to play with him occasionally," Vannelli says, "and pretty quickly I found myself hooked." Vannelli played his first 18-hole round of golf at Rutgers Golf Course and played in his first tournament—the New Jersey State Amateur—in 1981. From that point on, Vannelli says competing in tournaments became a major interest.

Ironically, this year's hefty list of



Vannelli's big year included a victory at the Met Amateur.

achievements caps a year that began with only minimal training. "I was sick for several weeks last winter," Vannelli explains. "So I had to cut back on the working out. Then I pulled a muscle. So I didn't work out half as much as I normally do. During the winter, I try to get in better shape so I can play well when I pick the clubs up again in April."

Fortunately, for Vannelli, his game didn't suffer. The undeniable highlight of his season was his victory in August over Minisceongo's Patrick Pierson at the MGA Amateur Championship at

The Creek in Locust Valley, NY, which made him the oldest winner in the championship's 106-year history. Battling through one of the hottest days of the year against a much younger player, Vannelli saw a five-up lead disappear, but remained undaunted as Pierson forced the play into extra holes. Vannelli's imperturbable style finally triumphed when he birdied the 38th hole to take the title. "The course suited me," Vannelli says. "I'm probably the shortest hitter in the field every time in these events. And the course isn't overly long, so I was approaching the greens with the same clubs as everyone else—I wasn't at a disadvantage. And my strengths are my short game and my putting."

Later that month, Vannelli was the low amateur and finished in a tie for second with Bobby Heins, just behind winner

Darrell Kestner, at the MGA Senior Open at The Tuxedo Club. Although the MGA 2005 Player of the Year competition was a close race, Vannelli's finish gave him 653 points, enough to edge both George Zahringer III, the nine-time Player of the Year from Deepdale, and Sleepy Hollow's Brad Tilly, who amassed 628 and 625 points, respectively. (See page 51 for full results.)

Vannelli modestly attributes this year's success to "being in the right place at the right time and hitting a couple of shots that really mattered." He cites his twin birdies at the Ike as examples. "I birdied 17 and 18

at Plainfield to get myself into the top ten, which exempted me into the Met Amateur, which I won. But if I hadn't birdied those two holes, I wouldn't have been in the Met Amateur."

In a normal year Vannelli says that his goals are pretty basic: "I always try to play better, win my club championship, and try to qualify for the U.S. Senior Open or the U.S. Senior Amateur. But after this year," he says with a laugh, "it seems like I'm feeling a bit more pressure. To play well and just do the best I can is always my primary goal." ■