



Fast Track

Cameron Wilson took his game to another level in 2009 and finished as the MGA Player of the Year **BY BILLY CONDON**

In 2008, Cameron Wilson of Shorehaven proved he could contend against the area's best amateurs and professionals, as he reached the semifinals of the Met Amateur and was low amateur at the Met Open. But 2009 was Wilson's true coming-out party. Onlookers remarked on more than one occasion, "Wow, have you seen that kid play?" By the end of the season that "kid," who turned 17 on November 2, was the 2009 MGA Jerry Courville Sr. Player of the Year, the youngest in the award's 33-year history.

"Winning the MGA Player of the Year is definitely my biggest accomplishment, because it's a summary of great play throughout the season," said Wilson.

This teenage southpaw put his game into overdrive in 2009. He did it with long drives and cool nerve, and also did much of it in New Jersey. With four victories, including

two MGA titles, and an impressive run at the U.S. Junior all coming in the Garden State, you could say that this Connecticut kid had a home-field advantage *away* from home.

"I'm sure my parents enjoyed watching me play well in those New Jersey events, but they probably didn't enjoy having to drive me across the bridge every day," joked Wilson, who has yet to get his driver's license.

Wilson's sterling season began with his attempt to qualify for the toughest championship in golf: the U.S. Open. For the second consecutive year, he made it through local qualifying, this time at Laurel Links on Long Island, and earned his first 50 player of the year points. Wilson didn't fare as well at

U.S. Open sectional qualifying at Old Oaks and Century Country Clubs in Purchase, N.Y., but it's clear he's knocking on the door of playing in future Opens.

Meanwhile, 21-year-old Mike Ballo Jr. of Woodway, the captain of the St. John's University golf team, was also working on his own breakthrough year. Ballo won the Westchester Amateur, finished second in the CSGA Palmer Cup, and won the Ike Championship at Nassau Country Club, all in the space of three weeks. He surged to a 225-point lead over Kevin Foley of Neshanic Valley, while Wilson wasn't yet in the top 50 in the standings.

In July, Wilson found himself in one of the few events where the competition was solely fellow teenagers, the Met Junior at Engineers Country Club. He had never won the title and yet came in as a clear favorite; however, he was knocked out of the competition in the Round of 16. Following that disappointment,

2009 MGA Player of the Year Honor Roll			
	Name	Club	Points
1.	Cameron Wilson	Shorehaven	880
2.	Mike Ballo Jr.	Woodway	830
3.	Chris Scialo	Spook Rock	508
4.	John Ervasti	Sleepy Hollow	479
5.	Joe Saladino	Huntington	458
6.	Bryan Pendrick	Oyster Bay	341
7.	Ken Bakst	Friar's Head	338
8.	Mike Stamberger	Spring Lake	328
9.	David Pastore	Griff Harris	320
10.	Ed Gibstein	Engineers	294

Wilson hoped to rebound at the U.S. Junior at Trump National-Bedminster a few days later. Difficult weather conditions and tough courses greeted the junior competitors. Wilson got the worst of the weather in the stroke play portion of the championship but managed to advance to match play. He made the most of his opportunity, winning three matches and reaching the quarterfinals. He was only getting started.

Later that month, Wilson was a member of the East Team at the prestigious AJGA Canon Cup, a competition featuring the best male and female juniors from across the country. He went a perfect 4-0 in his matches, and though it didn't impact the player of the year race, it was a harbinger of things to come.

Wilson came out flying at the 7th Carter Cup held at Baltusrol Golf Club. This junior

Cameron Wilson powered and finessed his way to wins at the Carter Cup (left) and the Met Amateur (below, with runner-up John Ervasti).





Wilson began to show his future college colors this summer.

stroke play invitational features the Met Area's finest young stars at one of the most famous championship sites in golf. Wilson had finished second the past two years, but this time, he shot a spectacular 66 on the famed Lower Course to finish with a two-round total of 137, the lowest score in event history. The Carter Cup also saw the debut of Wilson's new Stanford University head cover. An honors student at St. Luke's School in New

Canaan, he has been accepted for enrollment at Stanford in the Fall of 2010, and will join a golf program that counts Tiger Woods and Tom Watson as famous alumni.

But Wilson had no time to rest on the laurels of his Carter Cup win. The Met Amateur at Hackensack Golf Club began the very next day, which meant another 36-hole, stroke play marathon. Wilson made the stroke play cut and drew a tough opponent, former Duke University golf captain Michael Quagliano, in the first round. This marquee match featured the drama of a championship bout, and the youngster scored a 3 & 1 victory to advance to the quarterfinals against Colin Dolph. In that match, he broke open a tight contest with four birdies and an eagle over six holes to beat Dolph, 6 & 5. He followed it up with a 3 & 2 victory over Sean Curtin in the semifinals.

Advancing to the 36-hole championship match of the Met Amateur for the first time, Wilson faced the oldest player in the field to make match play, 54-year-old John Ervasti of

Sleepy Hollow. Ervasti held his own, but Wilson's stamina and talent were too much to overcome. Wilson earned a 4 & 3 decision for his second MGA title in five days. In doing so, he broke the record for youngest champion set by fellow Shorehaven member Tommy McDonagh, who won his first Met Amateur in 2006 at age 17.

To no one's surprise, Wilson shot 66-70 in U.S. Amateur Sectional Qualifying and headed to Tulsa for his second USGA championship in a month. He made it to match play and to the Round of 32, garnering some national TV time in the process."



"It was clear at the Met Amateur and throughout the season that Cameron is as talented a young player as the Met Area has ever seen," said former MGA tournament director Gene Westmoreland. "To have that

combination of poise, maturity and talent at his age is exceedingly rare."

The Met Amateur win provided a huge lift to Wilson in the player of the year standings, and for the first time all year Ballo's comfortable lead was threatened (*see chart, previous page*).

Following the Carter Cup/Met Amateur gauntlet, Wilson gave himself one day of rest — he would play a total of 187 holes in the seven-day span — before starting another 36-hole event, the U.S. Amateur sectional qualifier at GlenArbor. To no one's surprise, he shot 66-70 to earn co-medalist honors, and headed to Tulsa for his second USGA championship in a month. He made it to match play and to the Round of 32, garnering some national TV time in the process.

The MGA Player of the Year race truly became a race with Wilson's blistering August run. It had become a two-(young) man contest with Ballo, who sat atop the points list for much of the season but now found himself in a tight battle. While the MGA championship season was ending, there were still events left on the schedule for both players.

In the second week of September, Wilson played in, and won, the Bergen County Amateur, firing a 63 in the final round of the 36-hole championship. Ballo played steady but finished fourth, which narrowed his lead in the player of the year standings to a slim five points.

Wilson then reached the quarterfinals of the Nassau Invitational, and that propelled him ahead of Ballo in the standings for the first time all season, with one event left to earn points, the Boff Invitational at Shackamaxon Golf & Country Club in New Jersey. The two young stars battled for all 36 holes, with Wilson edging out Ballo by one stroke to win, solidifying his position as the 2009 MGA Jerry Courville Sr. Player of the Year.

This year will be remembered for many outstanding highlights at all 16 MGA championships. For Cameron Wilson, it marks the season when he turned potential into reality, and stamped himself as one of the greatest young players in the long and rich history of Met Area golf. ■

Race to the Finish

By the end of August, Cameron Wilson and Mike Ballo Jr. were engaged in one of the closest MGA Player of the Year races ever. Below is a chart showing the anatomy of this year's photo finish.



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