

JON SAXTON

MGA PLAYER OF THE YEAR

by Bill Brink

The talent first surfaced in the grey, early-morning light of spring, when Dave Saxton would rouse his 12-year old son Jon at 6 o'clock and take him to nearby Innis Arden Country Club in Old Greenwich, Conn., to hit golf balls. "It became pretty much every day, weather permitting, between March and June," Dave Saxton recalls. "We did it for about three straight years. It took a lot of dedication, but it got to be kind of fun. Our little game." Jon?

"Well, actually it was kind of rough getting up that early to beat on balls, especially at first when I wasn't doing it well. But I guess my dad saw some talent."

The talent survived a bout with baseball—"I thought that was really my sport," Jon says—and it was not until he was 17 that he began to concentrate completely on golf, thanks in part to a somewhat short-sighted baseball coach who insisted on batting Jon ninth despite the fact that he had the highest average on the team.

The winning began at age 14 when his father started entering him in local tournaments. "I'd just show up and play," Jon remembers. "Sometimes I'd get there and ask the fellow I was playing with what tournament we were in." When he showed up at the M.G.A. Boys tournament that summer, short and skinny, the caddies took one look at him and decided he wouldn't be around very long; Jon himself says



Jon Saxton, 1983 Player of the Year with Jeff Thomas, 1983 Met Amateur Champion.

he was happy just to have qualified. Finally, someone agreed to caddy for Saxton. First, it offered an incentive that focused his efforts in golf and pointed them toward a specific goal. "I really got interested after that," he says. "I enjoyed winning. Before that, I didn't know what winning was." Second, it began a process of shedding the somewhat wide-eyed reaction Saxton had to his success, the sense of surprise that he, who was delighted just to be playing in a tournament, could actually beat good players, could actually win. Like a chisel, each victory over the years chipped away at that sense of wonderment and instilled a confidence in his ability to be a champion.

That first victory in the M.G.A. Boys provided two important things for Saxton. First, it offered an incentive that focused his efforts in golf and pointed them toward a specific goal. "I really got interested after that," he says. "I enjoyed winning. Before that, I didn't know what winning was." Second, it began a process of shedding the somewhat wide-eyed reaction Saxton had to his success, the sense of surprise that he, who was delighted just to be playing in a tournament, could actually beat good players, could actually win. Like a chisel, each victory over the years chipped away at that sense of wonderment and instilled a confidence in his ability to be a champion.

The winning continued, through junior tournaments,—he won the M.G.A. Junior—through Greenwich High School, through four years at the University of Virginia, through the best open and amateur events in the metropolitan area. In 1983, Saxton was outstanding, and has been named the Metropolitan Golf Association's player of the year.

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"Jon always had the talent," says Clem King, Saxton's teammate for a year at Virginia who then became golf coach in Jon's senior year. "It was his confidence level that had to come up. I think he had doubts that he was as good as anyone he was playing, and he *was*. He just had to believe it."

"Jon's shy, he's never had delusions of grandeur," says his father, a financial consultant. "He's very sober about his place in life, and in golf."

Saxton's place in golf is now well established. Now 22 years old, with broad shoulders and curly blond hair, he had a 1983 season that confirmed his standing as one of the top two or three amateurs in the area. This was the year Jonas Blaine Saxton could stop being surprised when he won.

Saxton, who now plays out of the Greenwich Country Club, won three major events; the Westchester Amateur (his third in a row), the Connecticut Amateur and the Ike (his second in three years). He was the second low-amateur in the Westchester Open, was sixth in the New England Amateur, and, for the second year in a row, finished as runner-up to Ed Sabo, a pro who was probably the Met area's best golfer, in the Connecticut Open.

"Jon's probably the *top* amateur in the area now," says Jeff Thomas, a New Jersey player who is another top amateur and a good friend of Saxton. Mark Diamond of Long Island, another of the area's best players and also a good friend, says: "Without a doubt Jon's the player of the year. He had a great summer."

Saxton is, by his own account and everyone else's, a terrific putter, especially in pressure situations. He won the Ike with a 20-foot birdie putt on the final hole. Fellow players

say he has a good mental attitude that enables him to keep an even temperament, as well as a doggedness in competition that keeps him in contention even when he is not playing his best. He also says that he "hits correct shots, I don't waste any," part of a course management that he feels is possibly the best in the area. "As far as striking the ball, I might not be as good as George Zahringer or a Mark Diamond, but I can compete because of these qualities," he says.

Saxton also rises to the occasion, which is to say he gets primed for competition. He does not leave his best shots on the practice field, because he's not often there. "I don't like to practice that much," he says, "and I'm not real serious about it when I just go out to play a round. But when it comes to tournaments, something switches in me. I really want to win."

"When a tournament's coming up, I tell myself about a week before to start concentrating and bear down. But I just can't, not until about the day before. It's something about a tournament that gets me going."

This tendency is confirmed, with modification, by Thomas and Diamond. Thomas says Jon is pretty easy-going and "not a hard practitioner," but adds "that doesn't mean he's not dedicated, and when it comes to competition, he's always there." Diamond says Saxton "isn't the kind to hit 500 balls, but he's so good now, who's to say that would help him. A golf swing is a touchy thing. Maybe if he got more analytical it would hurt him."

Saxton, Diamond and Thomas, along with several others, form a close-knit fraternity of young golfers who play with and against one another as friends more than rivals. In fact, at the Ike this year Thomas

stalled on the first tee ("I was asking for tees, doing everything I could,") because his playing partner, Saxton, was late and facing disqualification. "Finally Jon came running up with grease on his hands," Thomas explains. "He'd had a flat tire." The next day at the presentation ceremonies, after Saxton's birdie putt had beat Diamond by a stroke, Saxton thanked Thomas for his help. Then they all went out and celebrated.

Clearly, such friendships and good times are important to Saxton, and explain, in part, his approach to golf. He wants to win, but he wants to have fun, and have friends, as well.

"It was always important to me to have other things in my life besides golf," he says. "I wanted to spend time with my friends when maybe I should have been practicing. But I wasn't going to give in. I think I used to drive my father crazy sometimes." And Mr. Saxton admits, "Jon has pretty much run his own golf life."

It is for this reason that Saxton recently decided against turning professional, despite a generous offer of backing from a group in Greenwich and his belief that "I have the ability to have a chance out there."

"I don't think I'd like that life, golf all the time," he explains. "I'd go crazy."

At Virginia, Jon was an ACC athlete-honor student for four years, and graduated last spring with a degree in Economics. He says he will pursue some type of financial career.

He stresses, however, that "there's no way I'm giving up the game. I can still be a very successful amateur."

And that will surprise no one, not even Jon Saxton.

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