

# THE MET GOLFER<sup>®</sup>

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE METROPOLITAN GOLF ASSOCIATION  
JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1994 / VOL. 13 / NO. 1 \$2.95

A man with dark hair, wearing a purple zip-up jacket over a white collared shirt and dark trousers, stands next to a large, ornate silver trophy. The trophy is placed on a dark, fluted pedestal. The man is leaning his right arm on the pedestal and holding a golf club in his left hand. The background is dark and textured.

## PLAYER OF THE YEAR

JEFF THOMAS'  
U.S. MID-AMATEUR  
TRIUMPH CLINCHES  
TOP HONORS  
FOR '93





# NO DOUBTING THOMAS

*Anyone who considered Jeff Thomas just a good local player can think again.*

*The MGA Player of the Year capped a magnificent 1993 with a national championship—and an invitation to play in The Masters*

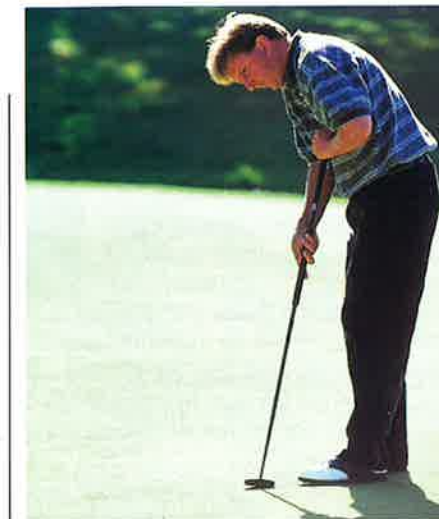
by Gary Dorfman

**Y**ou have to forgive Jeff Thomas for having become a little emotional on the 14th tee of the Eugene Country Club in Eugene, Oregon, this past September.

The 5-11, 170-pound, sandy-haired 35-year-old from South Plainfield, NJ, who can be as insular and solemn as Ben Hogan on the golf course and as sociable and freewheeling as Fuzzy Zoeller off it, had just birdied Eugene's 13th hole in the final match of the 13th U.S. Mid-Amateur Championship, and was moving in for the kill. In his previous five Mid-Amateur matches, the never-doubting Thomas had won quite easily, never really looking beyond his next golf shot, and here again he was in control, three up over 37-year-old Joey Ferrari of Lodi, California, with five holes to play. Only this time Thomas' mind began to wander.

In his first 20 years of competitive golf, Thomas had won a record seven New Jersey Amateur championships and several other regional titles, but never had he come so close on a scale such as this. His thoughts raced to his father, Chuck, who had lost a battle to cancer in

**MGA Player of the Year Thomas and his U.S. Mid-Amateur trophy: It's on to Augusta and The Masters.**



**A switch to the long putter in 1992 lifted Thomas to greater heights.**

1985. How he wished his dad could have seen him on the threshold of a national title. He began also to think of the azaleas, the magnolias, and the dogwoods—the technicolor mystique of Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia—and the invitation to The Masters that is part and package of the Mid-Amateur title.

"I got a little emotional thinking I could win this thing," Thomas recalls, "and that's never happened to me before on the golf course. I started thinking about my father and The Masters—and then I realized that this match wasn't over yet."

That became crystal clear when Thomas, whose long bout with the fiendish yips seemed to have gone into

remission, three-putted and lost the 15th hole. Then Ferrari birdied the 17th to close Thomas' lead to one up with one to play.

With renewed determination, Thomas hit the green on Eugene's long, par-four 18th hole, and surveyed an improbable 25-foot birdie putt that would close out the match. Clutching a putter the length of a broomstick, a gift from a friendly rival to cure his putting woes, Thomas cautiously lagged to within two feet. Ferrari then tried to push the match into overtime, but his 15-footer for birdie burned the left edge. Now it was up to Thomas. A straight two-footer for a national championship.

"I didn't want to think about anything else," he says now. "I just stepped up to it and knocked it in the middle, for a change. I've never had a feeling like that before in my life."

At a post-victory celebration in the Eugene clubhouse, Thomas, usually the life of the party, was quiet and contemplative. The next day, he took a drive in the Cascade Mountains. Along the way, he thought again about his dad.

Then suddenly, amid the mountains, the full magnitude of his accomplishment hit home, and he all but laughed out loud at the unbelievable idea that Jeff Thomas, the grass-roots public links golfer from South Plainfield was going to play in The Masters!

A few months later, the invitation



# THE ROAD TO HALLOWED AUGUSTA BEGAN WHEN A TEEN-AGED THOMAS, A BASEBALL FANATIC AND LITTLE LEAGUER DURING AN ATHLETICALLY-ACTIVE BOYHOOD, STUMBLED ACROSS A RUSTED 8-IRON AND A BAG OF SHAG BALLS IN THE BASEMENT OF HIS SOUTH PLAINFIELD HOME.

with the Augusta, Georgia, postmark arrived at the Thomas household—and was framed and hung immediately.

## The Masters.

The road to hallowed Augusta began when a teen-aged Thomas, a baseball fanatic and Little Leaguer during an athletically-active boyhood, stumbled across a rusted 8-iron and a bag of shag balls in the basement of his South Plainfield home. The club had been abandoned by his father after his days with the North Plainfield High School golf teams that won three straight New Jersey State schoolboy championships in the late 1940s. (Jeff's father still played, however, and he and Jeff's grandfather were steady weekenders at the Plainfield West Nine public course, just across the street from Plainfield Country Club.)

Thomas took the club and balls to the front lawn of a nearby factory and began to experiment with a swing, relying mostly on imagination and natural talent. Soon he was spending hours hitting balls, training himself with Hogan-like dedication to work the ball in every manner possible.

The initiation to the game continued at Plainfield West, where he caddied for his grandfather. Later, he toted for the membership across the street at Plainfield CC. He also took odd jobs during the week to raise the \$4 it would cost to play the West Nine on weekends. There he had one inflexible rule: He had to par the formidable 385-yard first hole and would replay it over and over—assuming the course wasn't too busy—until he'd get his four. It was a quest for perfection that was to permeate his play during the next two decades.

In 1972, Thomas entered his first tournament, the New Jersey State

Junior. He failed to make the stroke-play cut into match-play, but a year later he picked up his first trophy by reaching the semi-finals of the New Jersey Public Golf Organization Junior Championship. ("My grandfather built a small shelf for it [the trophy]," he recalls.) Thomas finally stepped into the winner's spotlight at the 1973 Rutgers Junior. In 1975, he added the Middlesex County Amateur and, in 1976, the New Jersey State Junior.

After graduating from South Plainfield High, Thomas enrolled at the College of Boca Raton, Florida, in the fall of 1977, but the Sunshine State was too alien for him and soon he abandoned the palms for the traditional golf courses back home.

In the fall of 1979, Thomas was accepted at Ramapo College in Mahwah, NJ, where he received his first national exposure, being named a NCAA Division III first-team All-American three times and placing second in the Division III individual tournament twice, in 1980 and '84. He also led Ramapo to the Division III national team title in 1982 and to the runner-up position in 1980 and '83.

In 1980, as a top individual performer, Thomas became eligible for the Division I tournament. When he showed up for a practice round at Ohio State University's Scarlet Course in Columbus, the starter sent him out with a trio from Florida State.

"Paul Azinger, Jeff Sluman and Kenny Knox," says Thomas with retrospective awe, referring to the three current Tour pros, one of whom (Azinger)



An intense competitor, Thomas seems to will his way to a good score.

has become one of world's best players. "I also remember that in the first round I was paired with another PGA Tour pro-to-be, Jay Don Blake, who wound up winning the thing."

That summer, Thomas finished second in the New Jersey Amateur behind Manasquan River's Bob Housen at the latter's home course in Brielle. A year later, Thomas won his first New Jersey Amateur title, at Canoe Brook Country Club in Summit. (He also advanced to the finals of the '81 Met Amateur, before bowing out to Peter Van Ingen.) "It was a big thrill to win my first State Amateur," Thomas says. "When I won, I thought, 'Wow! I'll probably never do that again.'"

But he did—six more times between 1983 and '91. The most memorable? Probably the '83 event, at Plainfield CC, where Thomas stood six

**A dark day: Thomas heads for home after losing a nine-stroke lead with nine holes to play, and then a playoff, to Jerry Courville, Jr., in the '91 Ike.**

shots back at the beginning of the final round but rallied to shoot 72 and win by three strokes.

In 1985, at Alpine Country Club, he took a one-stroke lead into the final and held off several strong challengers to win. He won again in 1987 at Beaver Brook Country Club in Clinton, and coasted to an 11-shot runaway victory at Twin Brooks Country Club in Watchung in 1988. But his sixth victory, at Hominy Hill Golf Club in Colts Neck, in 1990, which tied the record for most New Jersey Amateur titles set by Charles Whitehead of Plainfield between 1936 and '42, may have been the most impressive of all.

Thomas held a five-stroke lead after 36 holes, but an 80 in the third round resulted in a 10-stroke turnaround. He began the final round five strokes behind leader Matt Cannon and, although he chipped away at Cannon's lead, he still lay three strokes back when the pair came to the par-three 16th hole. What followed was one of the more memorable finales in the tournament's history.

First Thomas birdied No. 16. Then he sank a 10-foot birdie putt on the par-five 17th. At the home hole, Thomas hit 8-iron to within four feet. When Cannon ran his birdie putt five feet by and missed the comeback, Thomas drained his putt for the record-tying victory. "Jeff showed me that he's a very mature player," said Cannon, who has since turned pro and now plays the mini-tours in South Carolina. "He's the kind of guy who isn't going to give up and he'll find some way to get the ball in the hole. It's amazing that he birdied the last three holes. He's just a great player."

While Thomas' portfolio also includes two New Jersey Mid-Amateurs, five state Public Links titles and a runner-up showing in the 1982 New Jersey Open, two of the Metropolitan Golf Association's premier championships—the stroke-play Ike Tournament and the match-play Met Amateur—somehow have eluded him. Thomas has lost in the final of the Met Amateur four times—1981, '83, '88, and '92—and has placed second in the Ike three times, including playoff losses in 1984 and '91.

The '91 Ike, at Old Westbury Golf & Country Club on Long Island, probably was Thomas' most agonizing experi-

ence. After twice equalling the course record with 68s in the opening rounds, Thomas opened a seemingly insurmountable nine-stroke lead with nine holes to play over Jerry Courville Jr. of Shorehaven in the final round. But Courville returned a 30 on the inward nine and drew level. Perhaps not surprisingly, Thomas lost in the ensuing playoff.

Thomas had tried his hand before on a national level, venturing out to the 1990 U.S. Amateur at Denver's Cherry

## A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

### THE 1993 MGA PLAYER OF THE YEAR RACE

| Player              | Club            | Points |
|---------------------|-----------------|--------|
| Jeff Thomas         | Plainfield West | 1178   |
| George Zahringer    | Stanwich        | 748    |
| Robert Housen       | Manasquan River | 738    |
| Jerry Courville Jr. | Shorehaven      | 678    |
| Michael Doud        | Mohansic        | 410    |
| Frank Babusik       | South Jersey    | 375    |
| Paul Antenucci      | Ridgewood (NJ)  | 281    |
| Jeff Putman         | Somerset Hills  | 275    |
| Dennis Hillman      | Westchester     | 260    |
| Brad Kittsley       | Sleepy Hollow   | 250    |
| Joe Sommers         | Mt. Kisco       | 250    |

### HOW THOMAS WON HIS POINTS

| Tournament        | Finish              | Points |
|-------------------|---------------------|--------|
| Havemeyer         | Winner              | 75     |
| New York City Am. | Winner              | 100    |
| New Jersey Am.    | 2nd                 | 100    |
| Ike Championship  | 5th                 | 100    |
| New Jersey Open   | T7, Low Am (T)      | 103    |
| Met Publincs      | 7th                 | 30     |
| Met Amateur       | Quarter-finalist    | 100    |
| Met Open          | Sectional qualifier | 20     |
| U.S. Amateur      | On-site qualifier   | 125    |
| U.S. Mid-Amateur  | Winner              | 350    |
| Boff Memorial     | 2nd                 | 75     |

Hills Country Club where, in the second round, he drew Arizona State portside Phil Mickelson, the recent Mercedes Championship (Tournament of Champions) winner on the PGA Tour and the young man tabbed as "The Next Nicklaus." On the first hole, Thomas missed the green and chipped 30 feet past the hole. He was about to mark his ball when Mickelson, who had a four-footer left for birdie, conceded Thomas par putt. Mickelson's gamesmanship

had its calculated effect on Thomas, who never recovered after Mickelson knocked in his little tester to take the hole. "I got more publicity from that incident than from anything else I'd done," Thomas says.

But his more familiar rivals know all about Thomas. Says Housen, who won his sixth state Amateur last June and who, just days prior to Thomas' Mid-Amateur triumph, lost in the semi-finals of the 1993 U.S. Senior Amateur Championship: "I have the highest respect for Jeff. There are some who can hit shots as well as Jeff, but I've seen him score on golf courses that nobody was scoring on. He just wills himself a good score."

PGA Tour pro Jim McGovern, from Oradell, NJ, battled Thomas in the Met Amateur's 36-hole final at Plainfield in 1988 and found himself four down after only five holes. But McGovern, who will comprise the other half of an unprecedented Garden State exacta at Augusta when he makes his first trip to the Masters on the basis of his Houston Open win last May (see "Some Kind of Year," p. 22), rallied to win by 6 and 4.

"Jeff never quits," says McGovern, "There are holes where he should make six or seven, easy, and yet he walks away with a four. He's never out of a hole."

"Jeff is the ultimate competitor," asserts Joseph Falco Jr., a close friend. "I don't care if you're playing darts, horseshoes, golf, or making paper airplanes, Jeff is going to beat you and make his plane soar farther than yours."

"Sure, he marches to the beat of his own drummer," reveals another friend, Dennis Slezak, who won the 1991 Met Amateur with Thomas, who'd injured his wrist, caddying for him. "But when he's a friend, he'll help you out wholeheartedly. He's a warmhearted person who really cares about people."

So it's fitting that it was a friend who helped him out when the yips, which had plagued him since 1987, began to threaten both his competitive career and his sanity. In May of 1992, Jerry Courville Jr., pulled a long-shafted putter out of the trunk of his car and handed it to Thomas after the two had played together in the Donald Ross Invitational tournament at Plainfield.





"He was having trouble with short putts," Courville recalls, "and I told him how that part of his game was the only thing holding him back. I thought that he might use it [the long putter] for a while and then go back to the conventional putter."

Thomas hesitated to use the new weapon, but the truth is that he would have tried anything at that point. "I've got to thank Jerry for putting the long putter in my hands," he says. "It's made me a lot more secure over short putts. Before, I was decelerating, almost double-hitting putts, and I didn't feel comfortable."

With his confidence restored, Thomas had a sparkling year in 1993, beginning in May when he holed a 55-yard sand wedge for eagle on the second extra hole to defeat Rick Southwick of Gardiners Bay, in the final of the Havemeyer Memorial. "That just jump-started the season," Thomas says. "Everything snowballed from there."

He went on to win the New York City Amateur and place in the top seven in the New Jersey Amateur, the Ike, the New Jersey Open, the MGA/MetLife Public Links, and the Boff Memorial. He was a quarter-finalist in the Met Amateur, a sectional qualifier for the Met Open, qualified for the match play portion of the U.S. Amateur, and was named to the six-man team that represented the MGA in the 1993 French-American Challenge match against the Ligue de Paris at Sleepy Hollow in October. It was the third time Thomas was selected for this team, and though the team lost, his play was exemplary. And, of course, there was the Mid-Amateur victory. Thomas also shattered the Player of the Year point total record previously held by George Zahringer III.

Thomas' outlook has changed since then. During that meditative drive through the Cascades, he took stock of his golfing prospects and decided it was time to aim a little higher. "My goals have turned more to a national level," he says now. "The possibility of making the 1995 Walker Cup team is more of a reality. I think I owe it to myself to see what I can do nationally."

Indeed he does. And one can easily imagine Chuck Thomas looking down this April and smiling when his son's name is announced on the first tee at Augusta National. ■

---

Gary Dorfman is the golf editor and the lead golf writer for *The Star Ledger* in Newark, NJ.