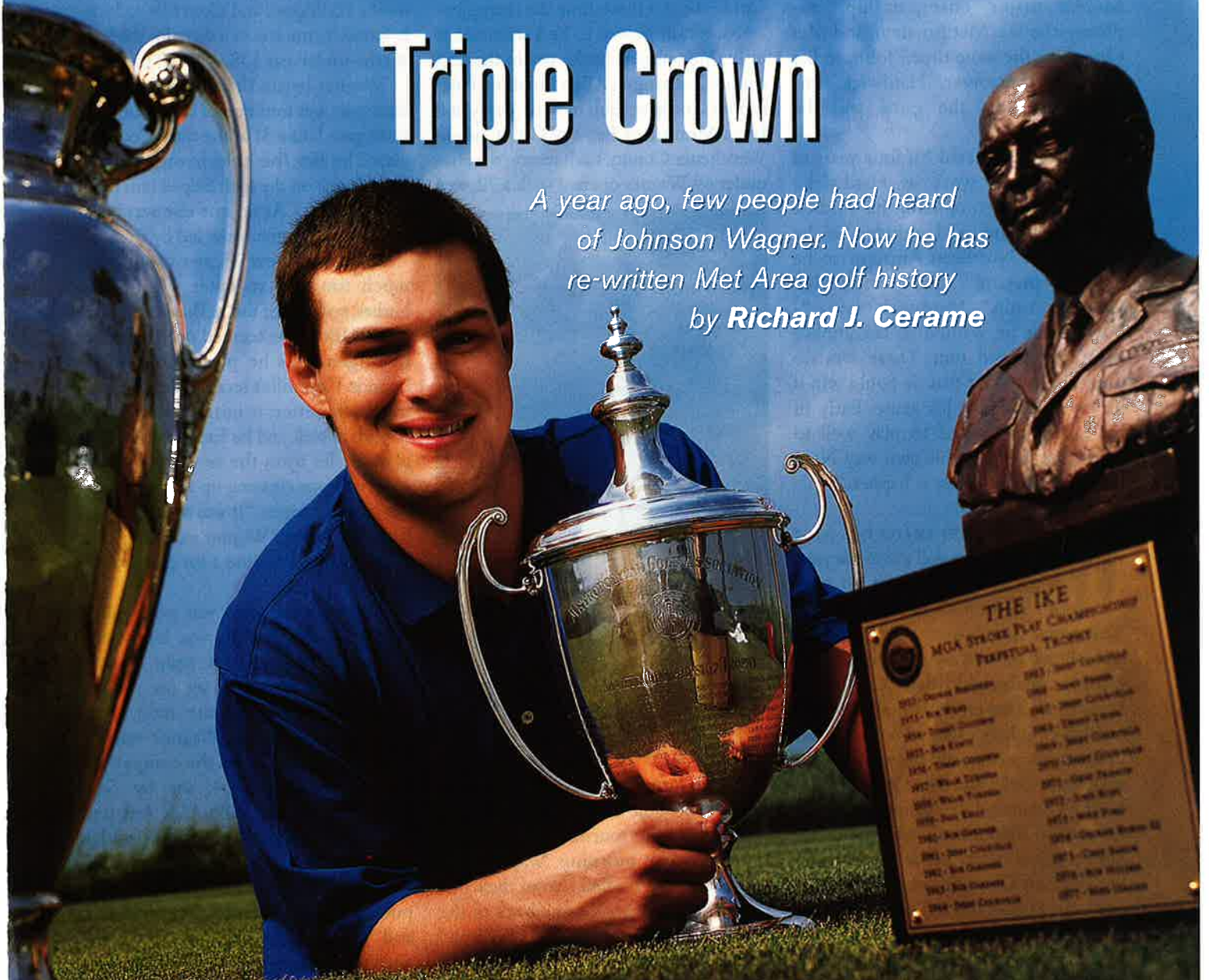


CoverStory

Triple Crown

*A year ago, few people had heard of Johnson Wagner. Now he has re-written Met Area golf history by **Richard J. Cerame***



NINETEEN NINETY-SEVEN WAS A TYPICAL SUMMER for Jay Hardwick. In his 14th season in charge of the Virginia Tech golf team, he had led his squad to its second consecutive Atlantic-10 Championship. But now he was off to scout some future talent at an American Junior Golf Association event in nearby Roanoke.

Hardwick checked all of his prospects, but was struck by a strong, burly kid who was playing with one of them: Johnson Wagner, from Garrison, New York. "He had a raw game, but great potential," Hardwick recalls. "When I first saw him he let two good rounds get away,

but I thought he could learn to keep that from happening. He seemed very coachable, which is important."

Important enough for Hardwick to approach Wagner about his attending Virginia Tech a year down the road. A quick stop at the Blacksburg campus on the way home was followed by a return visit later that summer, and in 1998 Wagner became a member of Virginia Tech's golf team.

Fast forward to 2002. The talent that Hardwick recognized on that summer day and nurtured on campus has made history. No longer is Johnson Wagner an unpolished young gunslinger with potential. Instead

JEFF WEINER

he is the first player in the 105-year history of the Metropolitan Golf Association to hold all three of the MGA's major championship trophies—the Ike, Met Amateur, and Met Open—at the same time. “Johnson has improved every year,” Hardwick continues. “He has the game and the determination.”

Having completed his four years of eligibility, he'll work as Hardwick's assistant while completing his studies. “He asked me if I minded if he skipped the Northeast Amateur so he could prepare for the Ike Championship,” Hardwick says. “I knew what he wanted to accomplish so I encouraged him. There was no doubt in my mind that he could win if he let himself play his game. Early in his career he wanted to play well so badly that he got in his own way. Now he's learned just to let it happen.”

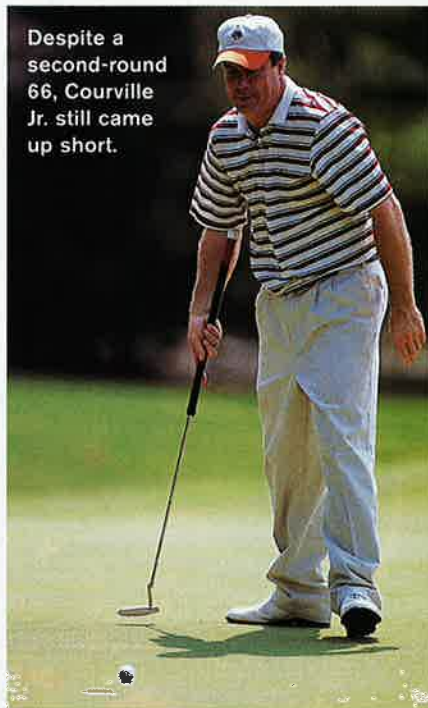
WAGNER BURST ONTO THE MET Area amateur golf scene last year, when he won the Met Amateur at Hudson National GC in Westchester County—his home course—and followed it with a victory in the Met Open at Bethpage's Black Course on Long Island. That made him only the second player to have captured both trophies in the same season, and only the fourth amateur to claim the Met Open.

He continued to shine when he returned to Blacksburg. He picked up his first collegiate victory in the fall, then won the Big East Championship individual title—the Hokies had moved conferences in 2000—while leading his team to its second straight Big East team title. That earned him third-team All-American honors and his second straight All-Big East team selection. In a sense, that all set the stage for this year's Ike Championship, the MGA's individual stroke-play championship and its first major of the season.

The Ike, presented by MetLife, was played over the rolling, par-70 third and second (in that order) nines at Montclair Golf Club in New Jersey. As always the field was laden with talent, including such perennial favorites as George Zahringer III of Deepdale Golf Club on Long

Island, the defending champion and nine-time MGA Player of the Year; and Jerry Courville Jr. of Shorehaven Golf Club in Connecticut, a three-time Ike champion.

Montclair proved to be a stern test as only three players broke par in the first round: Zahringer, Allan Small of Fairmount Country Club in New Jersey and Jason Monroe of Fenway Golf Club in Westchester County. Each returned a one-under 69. Wagner opened with a 72, well



Despite a second-round 66, Courville Jr. still came up short.

within shouting distance of the leaders, with the 36-hole final day remaining.

Starting at the tournament's 10th hole the following morning, Wagner and Courville each birdied two of their first three holes, but both came back to the pack, Courville with bogeys on 15 and 18 and Wagner with a bogey on 14 and a double bogey on 18. But there followed one of the most impressive stretches of amateur tournament golf seen in these parts in recent memory. After making the turn, Courville carded three birdies in four holes, and then added another at the short par-five sixth. A bogey followed on the downhill par-three seventh, but Courville rebounded with birdies on the eighth and ninth, both par fours, for an inward nine of 30 to pair with his outward 36. Wagner, meanwhile, wasn't far behind. He birdied four holes on the way in for a 31

and also finished with a 66. As Zahringer and Monroe struggled with rounds of 76 and 75, respectively, and Small managed only a 72, Wagner and Courville suddenly found themselves in a share for the lead, at two-under-par 138, with 18 to play.

Wagner began the final round with three pars, but four birdies on the next six holes gave him a 31 at the turn. Courville played his first five holes in one over par, but an eagle on the sixth helped him reach the turn in 35. As no one else was making a move, Wagner now led by four.

Courville knew Wagner was playing much too well to falter. He needed birdies, and lots of them. But his tee shot on the 10th hole seemed only to reflect his urgency, as he pushed it out-of-bounds. Courville's second tee shot wasn't much better; it nearly went out of bounds as well, and he had to take an unplayable lie from the trees. And while Courville was running up an eight, Wagner carded a birdie. “It was sad to see that happen to Jerry,” Wagner said later. “But it made my back nine a lot easier, that's for sure.”

Although the slam was now a formality—Courville still was his nearest contender, and he was eight back—Wagner had his sights set on another record. After playing the next seven holes in two under, Wagner needed only to par 18 to equal the competitive course record of 64, set by Sam Randolph in the 1985 U.S. Amateur on-site qualifying. But the 18th, which he had doubled in the second round, continued to be his nemesis. He three-putted for a bogey, a 65, a total of 203, and victory by eight strokes. “It felt amazing,” Wagner said of his final two rounds, which he played in nine under par. “I can't even describe it. Every shot I hit, I pretty much knew where it was going, and I've never really felt that way.”

Small finished alone in second at 211, while Courville shared third place at 212 with Martin Catalioto of Darlington Golf Club in New Jersey and 1998 Ike champion Greg Rohlf of Wykagyl Country Club in Westchester County. Courville teamed with fellow Shorehaven member John Bauman to take home the Ike Team

Championship with a total of 438.

It was only after he'd finished that Wagner discovered he had set another record: he lowered the Ike's 54-hole scoring mark—set most recently in 1992 by current PGA Tour member Michael Muehr—by three blows. "It's quite an honor," Wagner offered, "to own something in the Met Area that no one else has done."

SO WHERE DID THIS POLITE, 22-YEAR-old emerge from? How could someone who had hardly appeared in a previous MGA major suddenly win three in a row?

The truth is, Wagner's been winning all his life. He's a two-time Westchester Golf Association Junior champion, for example. He's just so young that we haven't had many chances to see him.

Monford Johnson Wagner, named after his grandfather M.T. Johnson, a former USGA treasurer, was born in Amarillo, Texas, in 1980, the second son of Betty and Tommy Wagner. Johnson, as he has always been called, picked up the

game at the age of five in the fierce winds and grueling Texas heat. Two years later, his family moved to Nashville, Tennessee, where his father studied at Vanderbilt University, and Johnson began to play the Tennessee Junior Tour. After almost seven years in Nashville, the Wagners moved again, this time to Garrison, directly across the Hudson River from the United States Military Academy at West Point, where Tommy joined the faculty teaching computer science.

As Johnson began to grow, so did his golf game, with the help of the Met Area's many excellent junior programs. When not working on his game as a junior member of Osiris Country Club in Walden, New York, he became a regular on the Met PGA's Junior Tour while also competing in the MGA's and Westchester Golf Association's Boys & Junior Championships. Johnson's first breakthrough came when he won the 1995 and '96 WGA Junior titles, each time at Knollwood Country Club in Westchester County. He also had success playing for O'Neill High School, near West Point,

winning the Orange County Junior Championship in his freshman and senior years. In 1996, he began to travel around the country competing in AJGA events against the nation's top junior golfers. That was when Hardwick took notice, and Johnson's career really began to take off.

SO WHAT'S IN STORE FOR WAGNER now? This summer he's been playing amateur events—including the defense of his Met Amateur and Open titles—and in the fall he'll return to V-Tech. "We'll work on his game so that he can prepare for the Tour's Qualifying School in November," Hardwick says, "and hopefully he'll fulfill his dream."

If he makes it, he'll turn pro. If not, he should earn consideration for the 2003 U.S. Walker Cup team.

Whatever he chooses, at least no one can now wonder where this wonderkid came from. It's all right there in the re-written MGA record book. 🍷

Richard J. Cerame is the MGA's Communications Manager.



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