

Sports

Marty Budner editor/644-1101



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Van Vleck's lucky streak comes to halt

Playoff decides O&E winner

By C.J. Rieak
staff writer

Evaluating the three golfers teeing off at Whispering Willows' first hole for a championship flight playoff in the Observer & Eccentric mens tournament Sunday, the favorite had to be John Van Vleck of Farmington Hills.

He was a three-time former champion (1976, '77 and '83); he was playing in his final O&E tournament (he is moving to Brighton), so he had added incentive; and he had displayed a knack for the remarkable this summer, surviving four previous playoffs to qualify for the U.S. Amateur, the Golf Association of Michigan tournament, the Michigan Amateur and the U.S. Open.

It had been a season of miracles for Van Vleck. Even after a poor second round of 76 — he shot 70 Saturday to tie John Smith of Plymouth and Craig Henriksen of Farmington for the tournament lead — Van Vleck was still in the running.

Smith also had a 76, and Jim Hedges of Birmingham had the day's best round, a 74, to tie at five-over-par 146.

BUT ALL STREAKS come to an end. Van Vleck seemingly had the tournament wrapped up on both the first and second holes, but it was his opponents who pulled off astounding shots to stay alive. Then on the third hole — the easiest of the three — bad fortune descended upon Van Vleck like the sudden storm that swept toward the course.

And Hedges took full advantage, playing his steadiest golf of the overtime to claim his first O&E championship.

"I thought the party was over," said Van Vleck after the first overtime hole. "These guys came up with a couple of great shots."

They did just that. But there's need for an asterisk here; for now, Hedges is the "provisional champion." Moments after completing the playoff, the storm came, forcing a wash-out of the afternoon session.

THE WINNERS of the first and second flights must still be decided, and at least two members of the afternoon session — Murray Brooks of Westland and Joe Borkowski of Troy, who had 75s on Saturday —

golf

had a shot at the championship flight title.

Those who were in the running for prizes will play their entire 18-hole round Sunday at Whispering Willows (tee times start at noon; call 476-4493 for times).

Hedges' victory surprised him as much as anyone else. The Birmingham Groves graduate started the playoff in trouble and stayed there on each of the first two holes.

"I was up against the wall," he said afterward. "My wedge saved me. To be honest with you, I thought I was out of it on the second hole."

IT TOOK a near-perfect shot to get Hedges — and Smith, for that matter — to the second playoff hole. Hedges left his second shot on the par-five, 475-yard first hole sitting in the deep rough just past the bunker, 15 yards short of the green. Van Vleck was on the green 20 feet from an eagle.

Hedges' chip was perfect, rolling to within six inches of the almost-impossibly placed pin (on a mound, three feet inside the right fringe). Smith also had a big problem; his second shot was right of the green, with a bunker lying between. He had no room for error, and he made none, pitching to within 2½ feet.

Van Vleck two-putted, giving all three birdies and taking them to hole No. 2.

AGAIN, TROUBLE loomed for Hedges and Smith. Van Vleck's tee shot on the tough par-four, 403-yard dogleg-left was right at the bend. Smith's tee shot was the shortest, but he still had a clear path to the pin.

But Hedges saw his roll into the thick woods on the right. With 180 yards and a pond to negotiate, it seemed impossible. But he hit his four-iron hard and the ball carried to within 20 feet of the green.

"I got lucky and had a good lie (in the woods)," he said, "and I hit it good."

Still, his ball was in deep grass, and his chip came up short, stopping six feet from the cup. He boled the

putt for par. Smith's second shot rolled to the back of the green, and his 50-foot birdie putt rolled eight feet past. He stayed alive by sinking the par putt.

And Van Vleck? He put his second shot on the green, 30 feet to the left of the cup. But his try for birdie was a foot short, and he settled for par.

ON THE THIRD playoff hole, Van Vleck's luck changed. No. 3 (par-four, 443 yards) is wide open, with a slight bend to the right but with few obstacles. But Van Vleck found one, hitting a small tree on the right with his drive. Then, compounding his problems, he hit another tree of equal stature with his second shot.

He was lying three and was still 150 yards from the pin. But that third shot was excellent — stopping six feet from the pin.

Hedges' tee shot was dead-center in the fairway and his second reached the green, 35-feet short of the pin. Smith had the farthest drive down the right side, but his second shot ended up in the rough 20 feet from the green. From there he chipped to within six feet.

THE WEATHER was deteriorating quickly, and tournament director Gary Whitener informed all three this would be the last playoff hole until the storm cleared. It was all they needed. Hedges left his birdie try seven feet short; Smith's par-putt rolled past. When Hedges made par, Smith was out of the running for first.

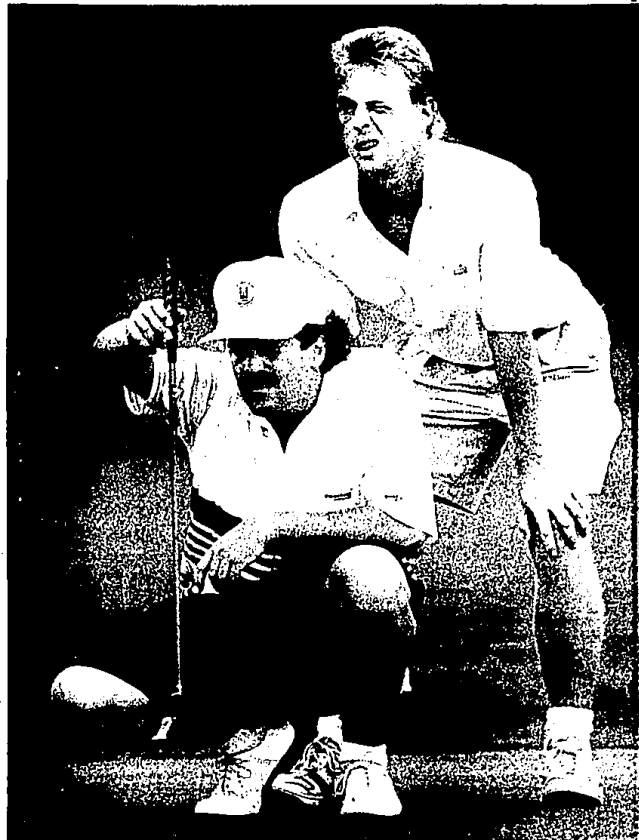
Which left Van Vleck, who had to sink his six-footer to tie. He hit it well, but the ball circled the cup and stayed out, giving Hedges the win.

The scrambling style he needed to claim the win cemented Hedges' self-chosen nickname: "master of disaster." He needed to be just that to survive, and not just in the overtime. "I three-putted four times," he said of his Sunday round. "My iron play was halfway decent. And I made some crucial putts when I had to."

The O&E tournament win was his first this year. Hedges tied for fifth in the Syron Memorial Tournament in Pontiac and was 25th at the Michigan Open.

The third flight was decided before the first hole.

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John Van Vleck of Farmington Hills (kneeling) sizes up a putt on the first hole during a playoff in the Observer & Eccentric golf tournament. His brother-in-law and caddy, Dan Tilt, evaluates the situation, too.

STEVE FECHT/staff photographer

Falcons win again at S'craft

By Brad Emons
staff writer

The Olympic Games in Seoul isn't the only place where results can change and a new winner declared. Meet officials had to do some refiguring in boys team standings after a runner from Redford Bishop Borgese dropped out of the 3,000-meter race during Saturday's 23rd running of the Schoolcraft College Invitational.

As it ended, Farmington captured its fifth straight boys crown after it appeared Plymouth Canton had won the meet by a point.

But on the girls side there was no such confusion as Canton ran away with the title, outdistancing Livonia Stevenson and RU. (See statistical summary.)

"Congratulations, Jim, it looks like you got us by a point," said Farmington coach Jerry Young prematurely to Canton's Jim Hayes before the final boys point totals were announced.

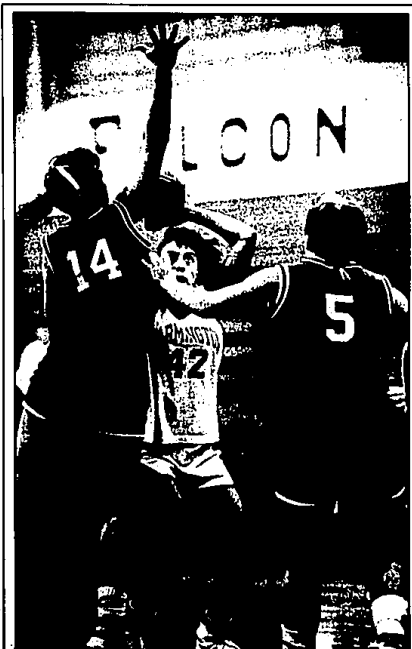
Originally, Canton scored 91 points and Farmington 82, but since one of the five Borgese runners quit, its places and point totals were thrown out, moving up all the other teams' runners.

WHEN THE STANDINGS were recounted, both Canton and Farmington each had 87, but the tie was broken when Farmington's sixth runner, Matt Landman, who finished 34th overall, beat out Canton's sixth man, Jason Napolitano, who was 40th.

"I feel bad for Canton, but I'll take it," Young said. "We were well, but the times were a little inflated because the course was short."

"We wanted our guys to run in a

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RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Falcons grounded

Christina Hoffman (14) and Tracy Martin (5) stand in the way of Farmington's Maria Ferrari and a possible field goal Tuesday. Ferrari scored 16 points, but John Glenn defeated the Falcons 71-44. See story on Page 2D.

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