

No 1st timer will win PGA

Host Pro foresees near-record rounds

By MARTY BUDNER

Al Mengert is rightly excited about this year's PGA Championship.

The fifth-year Oakland Hills club professional will host his first major tournament at the Oakland Hills Country Club. Mengert predicts record-setting performances by the competitors and big galleries.

"I think this year someone will break 280, and that hasn't happened here too many times," said Mengert. "The players hit the ball a lot further today than they used to. That's why I think there will be some great golf played here."

Tom Watson, who failed to qualify for the recent U.S. Open at Toledo's Inverness Club, is currently the leading money winner on the professional circuit. Other consistent golfers this year have been Andy Bean, Jerry Pate, Lanny Watkins and Hubert Green.

The tour's more famous players — Jack Nicklaus, Johnny Miller and defending Oakland Hills champion Gary Player — have virtually been shut out.

Mengert believes this will change at Oakland Hills.

"No first timer will win this tournament," he said.

"This is a fine course, and great golf has to be played here. It rewards all the great talent in golf.

"Not too many unknowns win here. You have to be one of the established players to do well on this course."

Oakland Hills' South Course will be a par-70, 7,014-yard challenge. The second and 12th holes will be par 5s, the third, ninth, 13th and 17th par 3s, and the remainder par 4s.

The shortest hole is the 193-yard 13th, while the longest will be the 568-yard 12th hole. Designed in 1917 by Donald Ross, the South Course was toughened up before the 1951 U.S. Open by Robert Trent Jones. He recently redesigned three holes by narrowing fairways and adding bunkers.

Mengert said all golfers who have won championships at Oakland Hills were the finest of their time: Cyril Walker won in 1924, Ralph Guldahl in '37, Ben Hogan in '51, Gene Littler in '61 and Gary Player in '72.

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and so was Hogan," said Mengert. "Littler was a professional for eight years, and that established him as one of the best golfers by then.

"And, of course, Player is one of golf's all-time greats."

MENGERT HAS had a rich golf background himself.

His amateur career was blessed with two national junior titles — in 1946 and 1947. In 1951 he took the Northwest Armed Forces Crown.

In the early 1950s he began his professional career playing alongside greats like Arnold Palmer and Littler. He's learned the sport's finer points from such legends as Hogan, Sam Snead and Byron Nelson.

Mengert turned professional 27 years ago. Since then he has qualified for 28 major tournaments on the professional golf tour, including nine masters and eight U.S. Open tournaments.

He is one of the few players to tame Oakland Hill's famous course, dubbed "The Monster" in 1951 by Hogan. He matched Hogan's record round of 67.

Since he turned instructor, Mengert has been head golf professional at private clubs in Westfield, N.J., St. Louis, Mo., Sacramento, Calif., Tacoma, Wash., and, most recently, in Cleveland.

Mengert is one of only six club professionals at Oakland Hills in its 63-year history.

Walter Hagen was the club's first professional, succeeded by Mike Brady in 1920, Ernie Ford in 1924, Al Watrous in 1930, and Mike Souchak in 1967. Mengert replaced Souchak in 1974.



Al Mengert, host professional, believes that no first-timer will win the PGA Championship. (Staff photo by Stephen Cantrell)

This special section on the Professional Golfers' Association Championship was published by the Observer & Eccentric newspaper staff.

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