

College Cool Comes to Rich Harvest



By Tim Cronin
Photos Courtesy of NCAA

Eyebrows were raised less than a decade ago when the NCAA switched the format of its golf championships from stroke play, that tried and true indicator of excellence over several days, to match play, a more mercurial form of determining a winner.

Detractors, including some coaches, said excellence would not necessarily be rewarded. Boosters touted the potential for drama at every hole.

It turns out there has been both excellence and drama, and few want to return to the old way. As an example, consider last year's women's championship. Washington knocked off defending champion Stanford 3-2 in a tumultuous title match that concluded with triumph on one side and tears on the other, all of it seen not just by coaches and family, which had been the case for decades, but a national audience on Golf Channel.

Truth be told, the lure of television is the reason why the men (in 2009) and the women (in 2015) swung away from stroke play, which had been used since the 1960s, to match play. Five players tee it up for a team in college play, but only the best four scores are on the team total. Try explaining that on television as the fourth and fifth players change identities.



University of Washington Women's Golf Team – 2016 NCAA Division I Women's Golf Champions



University of Oregon Men's Golf Team – 2016 NCAA Division I Men's Golf Champions



Aaron Wise, University of Oregon – 2016 NCAA Division I Men's Golf Individual Champion



Virginia Elena Carta, Duke University – 2016 NCAA Division I Women's Golf Individual Champion

Better to have them all count, and better yet, go head-to-head with one foe rather than the entire field. Thus, the NCAA went hybrid, with the old stroke-play format determining the individual champion over 72 holes, and also setting which eight teams advanced to match play. Golf Channel covers the final stroke-play round with the individual title and team berths at stake, and all the matches.

This year, the men and women will play on the same course for the third time, giving TV a two-for-one setup. And the course is Rich Harvest Farms, Jerry Rich's backyard layout on the west edge of Sugar Grove that started as a handful of practice holes and, since the 2009 Solheim Cup, has been internationally recognized.

"I designed this course for match play," Rich said when the women's regional lineups were announced. "If you lose one hole, or are two or three down at the turn, you're not out of it."

Northern Illinois University is the host, and as good as this is for the Huskies, it's even better for Illinois' men's program and Northwestern's women's program. If both play well in the NCAA regionals, they'll make the field and have a home area, if not home course, advantage. For Illinois men's coach Mike Small, whose squad boasts Western

Amateur champion Dylan Meyer and Illinois Amateur champion Nick Hardy, that would be a twist.

"In 2013, we lost the national championship match to Alabama in Atlanta, and the number of people who came out for that last match from Tuscaloosa was incredible," Small recalled. "The intensity and the focus they brought just wore on us. They could feel the passion of the crowd. And last year, we lost the semifinal match to Oregon in Eugene, Oregon. I've never seen anything like that before in college golf."

Defeats aside, Small sees it as a boon for the sport, which for decades was hidden in plain sight.

"It's kind of neat," Small said. "You see it in basketball, you see it in football, other sports, when the crowd gets on your side. At Oregon, there had to be a thousand people there. It was intense. There weren't a lot of gallery ropes or a lot of control of the people. They infused themselves right into the match. The fraternities got word of it, and about 2 p.m., they came onto the golf course, and it was an exciting time."

Meyer knocked off NCAA individual champion Aaron Wise in the semifinal, but the Ducks took a 3-2 decision – Illinois was a 40-foot birdie lip-out by Charlie Danielson from vanquishing the hosts – and went on to beat

Facts Box

Women's Championship, May 19 - 24

May 19 - 22, individual championship, stroke play qualifying (four 18-hole rounds)
 May 23, match play quarterfinals, semifinals
 May 24, match play final

Men's Championship, May 26 - 31

May 26 - 29, individual championship, stroke play qualifying (four 18-hole rounds)
 May 30, match play quarterfinals, semifinals
 May 31, match play final

If You Go

Grounds ticket prices range from \$10 for one day to \$50 for both tournaments. There are also two levels of hospitality with daily tickets ranging from \$55 to \$250 and weekly passes from \$275 to \$1,250.

The Skinny

Predictions are futile in match play, but – presuming they all make it to Rich Harvest – here are the teams and players worth following:

Men: 3 Teams to Watch

1. Southern California. Sean Crocker is a semifinalist for the Ben Hogan Award.
2. Illinois. Meyer and Hardy may be best 1-2 punch in college golf.
3. Oklahoma State. Cowboys host next year's NCAA championships.

Men: 3 Players to Watch

1. Maverick McNealy, Stanford. World No. 1 amateur wants team title.
2. Nick Hardy, Illinois. Seasoned by back-to-back U.S. Open appearances.
3. Doug Ghim, Texas. Arlington Heights native is a Longhorn standout.

Women: 3 Teams to Watch

1. Alabama. Crimson Tide rallied for second in SEC Championship.
2. Arizona State. Monica Vaughn was on last year's Curtis Cup team.
3. Florida State. Fourth in pre-tournament rankings.

Women: 3 Players to Watch

1. Leona Maguire, Duke. Current world No. 1 has flirted with going pro early.
2. Andrea Lee, Stanford. Freshman made U.S. Women's Open cut at 15.
3. Jillian Hollis, Georgia. Reigning Women's Western Amateur champion.

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Texas by a similar margin in the final match.

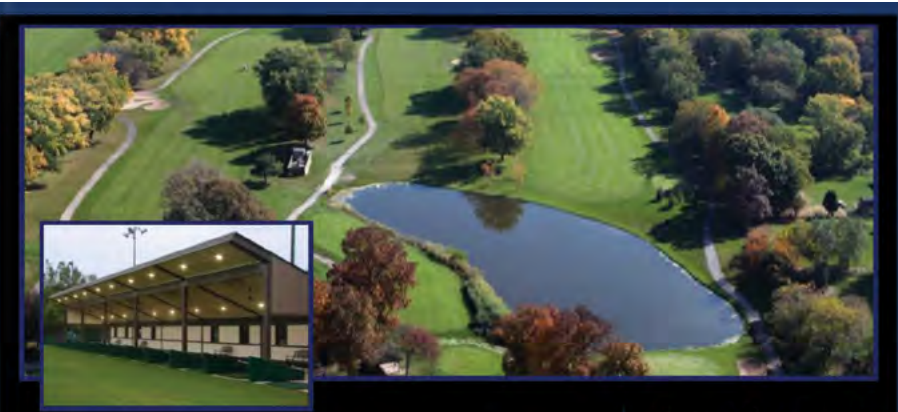
If the Fighting Illini are in the mix for the men's title, their fans could come out of the woodwork. The same could be true for Northwestern if their ladies' team, which lost the Big Ten title to Michigan State by two strokes, advanced from its regional. Pat Goss, the Wildcats' director of golf, remembered 1997, when Northwestern hosted the men's final at Conway Farms. "We played in the final pairing on the final day, and to have that in Chicago, to have that crowd, to have Northwestern people wearing purple, was an incredible experience," Goss recalled. "We know what a great golf city Chicago is."

Early indications were that ticket sales, at least by corporations, have been brisk. Whether that translates to large galleries for the tournament is unknown. The final round of stroke play and all match play will be from Monday through Wednesday to allow live TV coverage. The men's tournament running through Memorial Day weekend could help boost the gate, or it could mean people hang out in their backyards.

No matter which teams raise the trophies, Northern Illinois could be the big winner. The Huskies have never hosted an NCAA championship.

"We think this is going to be the emergence of our golf program," men's coach Tom Porten said. "If you like going to the BMW or the John Deere Classic, you need to come to Rich Harvest."

If you do, you'll be watching the PGA and LPGA tours in action a few years in advance.



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