

For area golfer...it's in the bag

Derick tries to defend last year's championship status at IV Women's Golf Tourney

By Andrew Dugas
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In the 55-year history of the Illinois Valley Women's Golf Tournament, only one golfer has ever strung together three consecutive titles.

On Sunday, all that could change.

When the ladies tee off at Lacon Country Club this weekend for the 55th annual tournament, all eyes will be on Penny Derick as she tries to defend the championship she has owned since 2001.



The Edgewood Country Club member will attempt to tie the record held by Kay Hines, who captured three straight titles from 1971-73.

As Derick knows, defending a title is no small task. "I'm feeling a little bit of pressure," she said. "I'm just hoping that's my lucky day. I hope to play well no matter what."

Roberta Benevento understands the pressure involved. She was the last woman to post back-to-back wins in 1997-98.

"I think after I won the first two, I came back and placed fourth the next year," said Benevento, who went on to win a third title in 2000. She added that the lack of expectations after that fourth place finish helped her get back to the top the following year.

Between the two of them, Derick and Benevento hold five of the last six Illinois Valley crowns. Although Benevento has decided to sit this year out, the competition remains plenty tough.

"It could go to anyone. It's just a matter of who has the best game out there that day," Derick said. "Carol Balconi has really stepped up her game."

Balconi gave Derick a run for her money last year, as the long-time friends played neck and neck through the first round. Balconi finished a close second, just two strokes behind Derick's one-over 76.

"I'd say I have an equal chance as everyone else," Balconi said. "There are so many good golfers in the area. It seems like everyone keeps getting better. (Derick) has raised her game to another level this year. I hope everything clicks that day for 18 holes."

Balconi and Derick will be playing together in the final foursome on Sunday. They say their friendship doesn't come into play when they compete, nor does the competition affect that friendship.

"More or less, we both focus on our own games. We'll talk about it afterwards," Balconi said.

Also in the field is four-time champ Judy Kalkwarf, who last won in 1999. She too has been in Derick's shoes, having garnered consecutive titles in 1985 and 86.

"She's going to have some pressure on her. Carol will put some pressure on her," said Kalkwarf, who will compete in the Class A flight this year. "The pressure going in, being the past champion, it's tough to hold up. I know from the past when I was there."

"The experience [Derick and Balconi] have is going to help a lot," she added. "They have matured a lot. They are both top caliber golfers right now."

Kalkwarf also hopes to lead the golfers from Tall Oaks Country Club to another team championship. Her team posted the best combined score in 2001 and finished just seven strokes behind Edgewood last year.

Clubs may take part in the team competition if they have at least five representatives entered in the tournament. The top four scores from each group are collected and the team with the lowest cumulative score wins.

"If we all play decent we do have a chance," said Kalkwarf. "The team to beat

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NewsTribune photo/Cory Soldwedel

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definitely will be Edgewood."

This year's tournament participants will be dealing with some changes from previous competitions. With only 49 golfers taking part, down from 60 last year, three of the thirteen groups will comprise threesomes rather than foursomes.

And to go along with fewer golfers, there will be fewer holes, as Lacon is a nine-hole course.

"It's a tight, hilly course, not a big course by any means," said Lacon member

Janet Nave, who is co-chairing this year's event. "It has small greens, which I think sometimes poses a difficulty for some people who are used to the bigger greens."

Nave, who won the tournament in 1996 and is participating as well as organizing it this year, believes the course will prove deceptively challenging.

"Everybody will find it a little more difficult than it looks," she noted. "It doesn't look like a difficult course. It's got its own character in that respect."

"If you don't get it right the first time, you'd better get it

right the next time," said Derick of playing on the shorter course. "I've been out there a few times already. You've gotta keep it on the fairway, because there are a lot of trees. Being a short course, the straight hitters will do well."

"There's only three holes you have to play differently," added Derick, who plans to go out for another practice round at Lacon on Friday.

Benevento has seen the reigning champ play many times. She believes Derick's skill and calm, professional approach are strong enough to carry her to the three-peat.

"I bet [her chances to win] are pretty good," Benevento said. "She's pretty good at everything. Last year she just couldn't do much wrong."

If that's the case again this year, Derick could make history on Sunday.

Tee times kick off at 9 a.m., with the last group scheduled to begin at 11 a.m.

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