

Riordon takes tourney

By Andrew Douglas
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LAcon — The field at this year's Illinois Valley Women's Golf Tournament was laced with experienced veterans, several former title winners and the two-time defending champ.

So naturally, the trophy went to a 16-year-old high school student competing in just her second Illinois Valley tournament. And all it took was the best round of golf of her life.

Carrie Riordon, a junior at Hall High School and a member of Spring Creek Golf Club, played 1-under golf on the back nine at Lacon Country Club Sunday to cinch her first championship.

Her 1-over 73 for the day bested two-time defending champion Penny Derick by three strokes.

"I never even thought of winning it," said a somewhat stunned Riordon. "Penny is a really good player. One of my last thoughts was that I'd win.

"It still hasn't hit me yet," she laughed.

Coming down the stretch, the key for Riordon was consistency and cool.

"I was striking the ball good," she said. "If I had a bad shot, I didn't let it get to me. I just said, 'I'll make up for it on the next shot, and I did.'"

Riordon didn't make very many bad shots though. Two strokes over par and two behind Derick after nine holes, she opened the back nine with birdies on Holes 10 and 11 and added another on 13, a tough 365-yard par 5. She finished with four birdies and nine pars overall.

Derick struggled on the back nine. After finishing the first half even with a 36, she parred the first two holes of the back half. She ran into trouble on 12th hole, slicing into some trees and needing two shots to chip out of them. She bogeyed that hole, as well as three of the next four.

A long putt on the 17th green saved her only birdie of the half, but it was too little too

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late.

"My second time around, my driver wasn't as strong. My driver and my irons. It just seemed like I was fighting to get up and down the course," said Derick. "It seemed like a totally different day to me in the second round."

Playing in the last four-some, one group behind Riordon, Derick knew the pressure was on.

"I found out what Carrie was shooting...and I let that get to me I think, because I knew I was only two strokes [ahead]. I knew I had to climb back to win, and I just couldn't do it. I was trying harder than I needed to try just to get a par, and that turned them into bogeys."

The fact that Derick was competing against history only compounded the pressure.

After winning the last two tournaments, she attempting to become just the second woman ever to notch three straight wins. That record was set by Kay Hines, who pulled off the three-peat from 1971-73.

"You know, I didn't know I was going up against that record until I read (an article in the NewsTribune)," she said.

Carol Balconi, one of the favorites along with Derick entering the tournament, also had a rough time on the back nine. She finished with back-to-back 40s, 80 overall, to place third.

"My swing was so off. My first tee shot was excellent, and then after that everything just fell apart," Balconi said.

Both golfers had problems with the greens at Lacon, which are smaller than those found at most courses. Add that to the hilly topography and you have a course that requires a great deal of precision.

"Your approach shot has to be perfect," Balconi said. "It seemed like once you hit the green, it would roll, so you wanted to end up short. It's very difficult to do that, and again when you're struggling with your swing it's worse."

Someone close to Balconi may be partly to thank for Riordon's performance. She's been taking lessons from Balconi's cousin, Jim Sipula, an instructor at Pine Hills Golf Course.

"She just started [working with him] this year, and he's really improved her game,"

she said.

"She's the area's next big golfer," added Derick, a fellow Hall Red Devil, of the new champ. "Everyone should be watching her."

Derick and Balconi's team from Edgewood Park Golf Course did manage to defend its Team Championship. They combined with Pat Balconi and Jillian Sauer to shoot a collective 340, six strokes better than second-place Tall Oaks.

Judy Kalkwaf of Tall Oaks, who has won five times in the Championship Class, captured the trophy in Class A, her first time playing in that class.

Her score of 77 was the third-best recorded by any golfer on Sunday.

"I was kind of disappointed having my handicap [high enough to qualify her] to be in A. But I played the best round of golf I have in a long time," she said.

The win automatically moves Kalkwaf back into the Championship Class for next year's tournament.

Hilda Koppens of Spring Creek shot 95 to win the Class B title, while Nancy Bland of Wyaton Hills shot 98 to win Class C. Marlene Sisler of Green River won the Senior Class.

Riordon, whose previous golf experience has come mostly during school competitions and smaller summer tournaments, entered the Illinois Valley Tournament last year for the first time.

Her first time in the event was a trial by fire for Riordon, who still recalls "bad memories" from that tough round.

"I matured a lot. Last year, I think, was the opening," she said.

Riordon's father, Edward, said the lessons she learned during that tournament made the difference.

"She played her best round of the year. Can't ask her to do any better than that," he said. "Last year I was even more proud of her when she had a real terrible start and she never quit. I think that's where she matured as a golfer."

A golfer himself, Edward Riordon boasts that his daughter has already "easily" surpassed him on the links.

"She wouldn't even let me beat her on Father's Day," he teased.

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