

'Varsity' Kickoff On Tap In Georgia

THE AMATEUR GAME By Jim Nugent

What began as a one-off Walker Cup preview tournament in 2001 has morphed into one of the most important elite international amateur events of the year. This week, the Jones Cup, played at the stout Ocean Forest Golf Club in Sea Island, Ga., will be contested for the 14th time.

Not bad for a one-off.

Along with Bill Jones, whose family owned Sea Island and who was a staunch supporter of the amateur game, current tournament chairman Jim Stahl was present at the creation. He recalls the thinking at the time: It was an opportunity to test the young Ocean Forest track, designed by Rees Jones and opened in 1995, and to give the host club a dry run for the Walker Cup in August of that year. Clemson University's D.J. Trahan won that first tournament by five shots from a 50-man field. The victory propelled Trahan onto that 2001 Walker Cup team.

So successful was the test run that clamor began to host it again. Stahl took the challenge, and the contest became an every-other-year affair through 2009. Beginning the following year, it became an annual staple on the global amateur calendar, effectively kicking off the new season each year.

How far this tournament has come. Past champions include players such as Kyle Stanley (2009), Patrick Reed (2010) and Justin Thomas (2012), all of whom have gone onto success in the play-for-pay ranks. The field has expanded to 90, and it will be one of the strongest fields of the year, as it is every year. Two qualifiers were held for this year's tournament, with more than 200 players vying for 10 spots. The tournament champion will gain a spot in the PGA Tour's RSM Classic, played in the fall on the Sea Island Golf Club's Seaside Course.

Did Stahl and company have a great vision for this at the beginning? Not really.

"I thought it would be a great way for the (Walker Cup) teams to get to know each other beforehand," he told *The Post's* John Steinbreder in 2011. "We invited the practice teams for the U.S. and (Great Britain and Ireland) squads as well as some very good juniors and mid-amateurs. I had some contacts in Ireland and Great Britain from the many times I had played over there, so I sort of became the go-to guy when it came to asking and finding the best players. I enjoyed doing this sort of thing when I competed, meeting golfers from different parts of the world and playing both with and against each other and I thought it might be fun to do that here, too."

Stahl knows a bit about amateur golf and what makes for a big-time championship. The 1995 U.S. Senior Amateur champion served as a member of the USGA's Mid-Amateur Championship committee for a quarter century and played in more than 30 major amateur championships through the years, including the British Amateur, the British Seniors Amateur, the U.S. Amateur and the U.S. Mid-Amateur.

Make no mistake about it; he has helped to make the Jones Cup a "varsity" golf tournament. It is played on a big and intimidating 7,312-yard course in January, and you best pack as if you will experience three different weather seasons, sometimes in the same day. Every club in the bag will be tested, as will your patience and nerves.

The preview aspect certainly worked in 2001, but perhaps not as American Walker Cup fans might have hoped. Luke Donald, who finished 19th in the inaugural Jones Cup, picked up enough local knowledge and insight to lead his GB&I team to victory in the 2001 match. In sweltering August heat that should have favored the American side, Donald won all four of the matches he played as the GB&I squad defended and retained the Walker Cup for the first time. It's also the last time the GB&I team won in America.

That inaugural Jones Cup was notable for another fact: Five mid-amateurs finished in the top 20, paced by future Walker Cup captain Buddy Marucci, who finished T3. In fact, about a third of the 2001 field were mid-amateurs, from both sides of the pond.

Sadly, few mid-ams compete in this tournament these days. That's no discredit to the Jones Cup; this is part of a larger trend, driven by a host of factors that has impacted most elite amateur events around the world. The Jones Cup has become a schoolboy event with a few precocious juniors, but a very good one at that.

Ole Miss standout Braden Thornberry returns this week to defend his 2017 title. It was a year ago that Thornberry introduced himself to the world by winning this prestigious event. Ranked No. 63 in the World Amateur Golf Ranking at the time, Thornberry won by five shots and went on to a remarkable year. He won the 2017 NCAA Championship, finished T4 in the PGA Tour's FedEx St. Jude Classic and landed a berth on the American squad that won the Walker Cup at Los Angeles Country Club last fall. He is now the third-ranked amateur in the world; when No. 1 Joaquín Niemann turns pro this spring as expected, Thornberry may well take over the top spot.

Let the new year in amateur golf begin

