

GAP puts quality in qualifiers

Early spring is the beginning of entries for the coming year's USGA championships, and those competitive golfers entering do so with varying degrees of aspiration.

During their online entry application, they are asked (if they haven't earned an exemption from qualifying) which qualifying sites they would prefer. And whether that entry is for the U.S. Open, the U.S. Girls' Junior or the U.S. Senior Amateur, this first step into making the championship proper is available in most of the 50 states and Puerto Rico as well as the U.K., Mexico and Canada.



Pete Kowalski

On the local level, the Golf Association of Philadelphia (GAP) is poised to conduct all aspects of the competition for **19 USGA qualifiers in 2023** as the administrative "arm" of the governing body. The first was at the Country Club of York on April 27 for the local stage for the U.S. Open in June in Los Angeles. Qualifiers will be held for the U.S. Open, U.S. Amateur, Junior Amateur, Senior Women's Open, Senior Amateur, Mid-Amateur, Women's Mid-Amateur, Senior Women's Amateur, Amateur Four-Ball and the Women's Amateur Four-Ball – 10 of the USGA's 15 championships within GAP jurisdiction.

In its role as a partner of the USGA and the host clubs/facilities, GAP concentrates on the competitive and player-experience aspects of each qualifying site. Among the operational details are the size of the field, the number of qualifying berths at stake, tee times, practice rounds, player inquiries, the number of courses, the course setup, signage, food and beverage, Rules of Golf, the necessary volunteers and weather monitoring.

"We approach every USGA qualifier the same way we would approach any of our majors," said Kirby Martin, GAP's director of competitions. "We handle almost everything the same, and its many details. It's like 19 extra majors on the calendar."

Planning is critical because of the number of events, the number of volunteers, the geographic spread of the qualifiers and the workload on the GAP staff.

"It's part of the grind for us," Martin said. "We have those circled on the calendar. Nothing is going to catch us by surprise. You try to do as much as you can in front of that curve."

"It's like 19 extra majors on the calendar."

KIRBY MARTIN, GAP'S DIRECTOR OF COMPETITIONS

Some are harder to get to the finish line than others, such as the U.S. Amateur, according to Martin.

"The hardest ones, the most labor-intensive, are for the U.S. Amateur," he said. "It's 36 holes; it's walking; it's in July. I worry about a lot more things in July than in May, even from a weather standpoint."

The scope of work is daunting, but Martin, a GAP employee since 2000, orchestrates a talented staff and eager volunteers.

"It takes an army between our staff and the club staff and our volunteers," Martin said. "When we go out to do a setup, that's four or five people to do things like painting,

picking the hole locations, picking the tees, keeping the weather in mind. The day of the event, it's another 25 or 30 of staff and volunteers."

As an outdoor-events specialist, GAP owns four vans that carry the necessities of a qualifier to include paint, stakes, tents, two-way radios, pop-up banners, signage, tee markers, flags, prizes, all the paperwork, and water/drink coolers.

"It's easier to say what's not in there than to say what is in there," Martin said.

Almost as numerable are the stories that have punctuated the qualifiers each year.

"We've seen some goofiness," Marty Emeno, GAP's director of operations, said with a smile.

"I had a guy shoot 63 on the front side at U.S. Open qualifying and was trying to get him to the parking lot after that. I told him, 'I have a guy in the clubhouse who finished with the score you shot on the front,' and he still wouldn't go."

Emeno and his communications team realize the impact of qualifying on players.

"We understand that qualifying for a USGA event may be the crowning achievement for a lot of golfers as a personal goal for them," Emeno said. "We treat it like it's a big deal, like it's a major. We want to give them the same kind of publicity they would get if you were competing in a big GAP event."



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COURTESY GAP

GAP players who make the USGA championship field are a huge source of pride.

"Last year, Jeff Frazier, our player of the year, made the semifinals of the U.S. Senior Am in Massachusetts with his brother, who had little experience, as his caddie," Emeno said. "He spent all night answering texts from his club and the guys he plays golf with. Then he said: 'I don't want this to end. I have to keep going.'"

Martin pointed to the victory by Chip Lutz at the 2015 U.S. Senior Amateur at Hidden Creek Golf Club in south New Jersey as his high point.

"Chip winning it at Hidden Creek with all of us working there in our backyard; I don't know how it gets better than that," Martin said.

With the extra hours and planning focused on the road traveled by the competitors, GAP certainly shows its expertise on a regular basis, and it does not go unnoticed.

"The aspirational nature of USGA championships is what makes them so special, and the USGA relies heavily on all of its Allied Golf Association partners to conduct 678 qualifiers across the country," said Brent Paladino, the USGA's senior director of championship administration. "For the Golf Association of Philadelphia, it is easy to see how much time, effort and dedication they put into hosting the best possible qualifiers. We are confident in the ability of GAP to deliver on an exceptional experience and truly

appreciate their commitment towards identifying deserving players who will vie for a national championship."

Martin and Emeno treat GAP players like family.

"I always tell people when I hand out the medal or the sheet that says you qualified, 'Hey, it's awesome. We'll be watching. We'll be rooting for you. I hope you have fun,'" Martin said. "I have a special feeling in my heart for those who make it, that put in all that work and all that time and money. I want them to know how we feel."

E-MAIL PETE

Top: GAP organized its 2022 U.S. Senior Open qualifying at Doylestown Country Club.

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