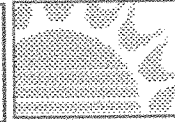


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04/20/01

An unbelievable winner

Applegate's 71 good enough for senior title after leader collapses

Joe Cristillo could not hide his emotions Thursday near the trophy table at the Florida State Senior Championship.

He stood stunned and in disbelief of what had just happened. Instead of celebrating a second consecutive title, the Crystal River resident was struggling to figure out how he threw away a six-stroke lead at the sometimes-unforgiving Riverwood Golf Club.

"This is awful to take," said Cristillo, moments after turning in his 6-over-par 78 scorecard. "What bothers me most is how I let so many people down."

Cristillo's Greg Norman-at-the-Masters-like collapse allowed a gracious player named Jim Applegate to take home the crystal vase.

Applegate, 58, who entered the round six shots behind, closed with a 1-under 71 to complete an improbable comeback and win the state senior championship by one shot in his first attempt.

"The FSGA is one of the top golf organizations in the country, and to win one of its championships with all these good players means a lot to me," said Applegate, a golf course designer who lives in Palm City. "We're just a bunch of amateurs who don't do this in life, so to shoot under par in the last round is very satisfying."

But as much as Cristillo, 59, did to give the championship away, Applegate still had to execute his own game down the stretch. After bogeys at the par-5 12th, and par-3 13th, the same hole he aced in the first round, the eventual champion converted a 25-foot-birdie putt from off the green at the 14th, securing a one-shot lead over Cristillo. He parred the next three holes before coming up with perhaps his best shot at No. 18.

Nearly 200 yards from the pin at one of the longest par-4s on the course, Applegate launched a 5-wood shot that landed 15 feet in front of the pin. After Cristillo's 60-foot birdie putt from off the green rolled past, Applegate two-putted for his one-shot victory at 4-under 212.

"That was the first time I hit that club all week," Applegate said. "I put a good swing on it into the wind. I just played to keep the ball in play."

Applegate earned an exemption into the Florida State Amateur Championship June 21-24 at World Woods Golf Club in Brooksville.

Like Applegate, Cristillo also won the senior championship on his first attempt a year ago at the Country Club of Ocala. He was trying to become the third repeat winner in the event's 34-year history and got off to great start with an opening 65.

His final-round troubles began on the front side, where he put his approach shot at No. 9 into the water for a bogey, finalizing his 4-over 40 at the turn. The defending champion then drove his tee ball into the lake on the right side at No. 12 and recorded his second double bogey of the disastrous round. He made six straight pars coming in.

"I thought I had a good shot there (at No. 12), but we don't know that slope goes down that much," said Cristillo "I don't want to take anything away from (Applegate), but if I shoot par, he's got to shoot 65 to beat me. That's all I was trying to do was shoot par."

Cristillo also said he missed five putts from inside six feet.

"That took a lot out of me," he said. "I think I would have been better off a stroke behind coming into today. I putted terrible."

Curtis Madson, of Mount Dora, who was playing with Cristillo and Applegate, two-putted for birdie at 17 and followed with another 15-foot par-busting putt on the final hole to finish at 72, putting him two shots behind Applegate in third place at 214. Madson eagled the 12th but gave a shot back with a three-putt bogey at No. 14.

"At the time, I didn't know where I stood, but I knew if I made eagle at 17, I'd have a chance," said Madson, who finished runner-up at the senior championship in 1997. "That three-putt really took it out of me."

New Smyrna's James Brown shot 71 for a 215. Sarasota's Ron Clayton had the best showing from an area player, finishing tied for seventh at 220.

In the 70-and-over Super Senior division, Riverwood member Hal Knuth sank a 15-foot birdie from the fringe on the first playoff hole to beat Tampa's Walter Baldwin. Both golfers shot a final-round 78. Second-round leader Moot Thomas, of Ocala, played the final two holes quadruple bogey-triple bogey, respectively, as he faded to an 83.

"I started out double bogey, and I'm thinking 'oh my God,'" Knuth said. "I didn't play real good today, but I had some good shots. This is a big win for me, especially to win it the way I did."

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Florida State Senior Championship

Final results of 54-hole tournament at par-72 Riverwood Golf Club

Jim Applegate, Palm City 67-74-71 212

Joe Cristillo, Crystal River 65-70-78 213

Curtis Madson, Mount Dora 70-72-72 214

James Brown, New Smyrna 77-67-71 215

Steve Sloan, Orlando 72-74-73 219

Billy Graham, Pensacola 72-75-72 219

Brian Sachs, Newberry 72-76-72 220

Lee Chira, Orlando 73-72-75 220

Bill King, Jupiter 69-75-76 220

Ron Clayton, Sarasota 71-71-78 220

Super Seniors

*Hal Knuth, Port Charlotte 77-76-78 231


Walter Baldwin, Tampa 75-78-78 231

*Won on first playoff hole

By **GRANT BOXLEITNER**

Sports Writer

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