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A 'crown jewel'

MICK ELLIOTT of The Tampa Tribune

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Although it has 84 years of history, no one will confuse the Florida State Amateur Championship, which tees off today at Brooksville's World Woods Golf Club, with any of golf's majors. But don't tell that to the field of 168 players.

"The levels are obviously different, but the expectations are certainly very much the same," former Florida champion Doug LaCrosse of Tampa said.

Golf is associated with Florida like sunshine and citrus. Florida has more golf courses - some 1,260 - than any state. Two Florida metropolitan areas - Naples and Fort Myers/Cape Coral - rank among the top five American cities in number of golf holes per 100,000 population.

Four times, a Florida State Amateur champion has won the U.S. Amateur - Robert Reigel won the state title in 1942 and the U.S. Amateur in '47; Bob Murphy won both in 1965; Jerry Pate won both titles in '74; and Buddy Alexander won the 1986 U.S. Amateur and '91 State Amateur.

"People look at Florida golf as having a lot of players who are competitive," LaCrosse said. "The depth of the field in Florida is much deeper than some states. So this is our crown jewel."

"Your name goes on a trophy which has a lot of great golfers on it. To be able to put your name on there beside so many great players is almost like getting your degree. Once you get it, no one can take it from you."

The final examination will be 72 holes of competition on World Woods' Pine Barrens and Rolling Oaks courses. A total of 716 players with a USGA handicap index of 11.4 or better began qualifying last month. The availability of two championship-quality courses allowed the FSGA to expand the field from 105 in previous years to this week's 168 players.

After 36 holes - one round each on the Tom Fazio-designed courses - the field will be cut after Friday's play to the low 70 scores plus ties. The champion will be crowned Sunday.

"This year's amateur championship should be fantastic," Florida State Golf Association executive director Jim Demick said. "World Woods represents pure golf and the two courses are two of Tom Fazio's best. When it comes to the competition, our championship committee is confident that we can set up these great courses to identify the state's best golfers."

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Here's a little secret. World Woods general manager Stan Cooke is a regular competitor in PGA of America and USGA events, including U.S. Open qualifying, so he is well aware of just what "championship conditions" can mean.

"Although the FSGA will set the hole locations, I'm setting the green speeds, so the guys better be ready to go," Cooke said. "I'd like to add a little quickness as the week progresses. We're going to try to set it up fairly. Obviously, we can make it as difficult as we want by pin position and green speed. But we want to determine the best player by giving them fair opportunities to make birdies. Fair means rewarding the good shots. So we're not going to be generous, but we will be fair. We want the best player to walk away having won the event."

Sarasota's Mark Leetzow (1995 and '97) and LaCrosse (1992) are former champions in the field. Among the younger golfers in a field that includes 35 teenagers are Thonotosassa's Patrick Gibson (16) and Berkeley Prep junior-to-be Ty Callahan. Crystal River's Joe Cristillo is the oldest at 58.

Area players of note competing include Bill Moore of Valrico, 2000 state amateur runner-up Joe Alfieri of Lutz, Tampa's Kevin Mock and Adam Swope of Wesley Chapel.

Eight of last year's top-10 finishers will return, although defending champ Justin Biggs won't.

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