

## Senior golf tourney saved

By **CANDACE BUCKNER**  
The Kansas City Star

Kansas City will play host to a professional golf tournament after all.

Following a four-month search for corporate sponsorship, the Champions Tour event, which has been a staple in the area for 15 years, has taken on a new identity along with new local sponsors.

During the Monday-morning press conference at host facility Nicklaus Golf Club at LionsGate, with local golf favorite Tom Watson in attendance, the newly named Greater Kansas City Golf Classic was unveiled.

Although the Classic's announcement came weeks after a soft September deadline set by the Champions Tour, organizers found a final sponsor only 10 days ago.

Sprint Nextel leads the charge along with HCA, Garmin and Cerner. Although the four sponsors have signed only a single-year commitment, Steve Palermo, chairman of the Pride of Kansas City Foundation, envisions a bright future for the event.

"You've got four really good corporate sponsors (that) have stepped in," Palermo said. "This really becomes possibly a great turning point in the history for this tournament to have such great companies such as these."

As a stop in the Champions Tour, the Classic will play host to the top 50-and-over professional golfers on a new date, June 26 to July 2, 2006.

Last year at rain-soaked LionsGate, Dana Quigley overcame Watson and Gil Morgan in a three-way Monday playoff for the victory.

"This is Tom Watson's hometown, and we don't ever, ever want to lose a golf tournament here," said Bob Burris, executive director of the Foundation, the nonprofit organization that manages the Classic. "We were always going to have an event here, it was just a matter of who was going to support it."

Monday ended months of uncertainty as the event dangled without a sponsor.

For three summers, Bayer Animal Health invested an estimated \$1.9 million to \$2.1 million a year for sole sponsorship and naming rights. But on July 28, about six weeks after the Quigley's tournament win, Bayer announced it would not renew its agreement.

Champions Tour president Rick George said that once a sponsor leaves, a tournament typically can recharge and find a new backer. However, sponsor absences can affect a tournament's future.

"What we found is that if you leave a community, it's very hard to come back," George said. "We knew that if we did not have a tournament here in '06, it would be very hard to come back in '07. It's difficult to do at that point."

So since the summer, in what Palermo described as a methodical rather than a frantic search, event organizers began pitching the product to local companies. The board met monthly and by mid-August secured Sprint through Len Lauer, the company's chief operating officer. Although Sprint did not want to be the title sponsor, Lauer joined the search for more corporate help.

"Our employees came up to me and said, 'Hey, is there any way we can keep the event here?'" Lauer said. "It's important to have professional golf still here in Kansas City."

The Champions Tour calendar was scheduled to be published in September with the determined destinations and dates, but George allowed more time for the Foundation, which had yet to secure all sponsors.

"We pushed it back because we felt like we were so close that we didn't want to walk away at this point," George said. "Fortunately, HCA came aboard, and that was the last piece of this great puzzle."

HCA, a health-care system that operates 12 Kansas City-area hospitals, committed Nov. 18 as the last sponsor.

"We finally got four," Burris said. "We're thrilled to have these four companies involved. The ideal goal is to have one company, one major company as the title sponsor."

With HCA on board, the tournament's new name was determined. Watson, who also attended that Nov. 18 meeting, had input with the name.

Watson's involvement behind the scenes continues with his recruiting of players and as a host to a social event at his ranch during tournament week.

"I've really always been on the sidelines here at the tournament," Watson said, "letting the proper people get involved."

Palermo echoed Watson's sentiments but suggested that although Watson was not involved on the business side, he has still played a vital role.

“He’s a tremendous help from a distance,” Palermo said. “Tom is revered in this community. He’s revered in the golf community ... so we’re always going to bounce things off of Tom.”

The Classic’s pro-am format will continue, allowing amateurs to play in the tournament with the likes of Quigley and Watson over the final weekend. The roster of players will not be announced until about two weeks before the tournament. Still, fans can expect a loaded field because the Classic will be the week before the U.S. Senior Open, a Champions Tour major, in Hutchinson, Kan.

“The field for this tournament should be the strongest one of any tournament,” Burris said. “That U.S. Open is in the same state, so (the players will) all be coming here.”

- The Pride of Kansas City Foundation, the nonprofit organization that runs the golf tournament and disburses the charitable proceeds, announced that the 2005 Bayer Advantage Classic Champions Tour event raised \$423,000 for various charities. Children’s Mercy Hospitals and Clinics was the primary beneficiary and received \$207,000. The remaining \$216,000 went to 14 other organizations.

#### **Greater Kansas City Golf Classic**

- **WHAT:** Champions Tour golf tournament
- **WHEN:** June 26-July 2, 2006
- **WHERE:** Nicklaus Golf Club at LionsGate in Overland Park