

## SAUNDERS JOINS ELITE COMPANY:

Written by TMAC GOLF

Thursday, 28 September 2017 19:30

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Just three days removed from the one-year anniversary of his grandfather Arnold Palmer's passing, Sam Saunders put his name in golf's record books with a 12-under 59 at the season-ending [Web.com](#) Tour Championship, contested at Atlantic Beach Country Club. Playing on his home course, Saunders recorded 13 birdies on his way to becoming the seventh player in [Web.com](#) Tour history to post a round of 59 or better.

Saunders, who moved to Atlantic Beach from nearby St. Augustine earlier this year, took full advantage of his home-course knowledge on Thursday, birdieing Nos. 10, 11 and 12 after starting on the back nine to race out to a 3-under par start.

A birdie at the par-4 14<sup>th</sup> pushed him further into the red at 4-under par, but a bogey on the par-3 15<sup>th</sup> – where he was forced to get up and down from a greenside bunker after leaving his second shot in the same bunker – proved to be the only blemish on an otherwise brilliant Thursday scorecard.

“It was fun. You know, it was a good time out there and it was a real special day. Certainly memorable. I played with my buddy Steve Wheatcroft and we kind of fed off each other,” said Saunders of his fellow Atlantic Beach member. “Honestly, it just felt like a regular day at home playing our little money game and I got into a good rhythm. It was a blast.”

With the mindset of a Saturday money game, Saunders played his final 12 holes in stunning fashion, beginning with birdies on 16 and 18 to turn in 5-under 31 before a birdie on the arduous par-4 second moved him to 6-under on the day.

On the short par-3 fifth, an errant tee shot over the green left the former Clemson golfer with a demanding up and down attempt, putting back downhill from 40 feet towards a green fronted by a pond and a shaved bank.

He holed it.

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“I hit it over the green. I mean, you’re dead. You’ve got no shot there. I putted it up the hill and it was going Mach one, it would’ve been 30 feet past the hole and it hit dead center,” he said. “I was just hoping for it to hit the pin. When I saw it was about 2 feet away, my heart rate went down thinking I was at least going to hit the pin. Then it when it went in I was embarrassed because it was a horrible shot, but you need to get some luck sometimes. I hit a lot of good shots today, so to see something like that go in was fun.”

The fun continued shortly thereafter when Saunders recovered from an errant tee shot on the par-5 sixth to post yet another birdie to reach 9-under for the round.

“At that time, when I made that birdie, I realized I was 9-under and had a par-5 left. I really didn’t start thinking about anything beyond that, until I birdied No. 7 to get to 10 (under par), and then I thought, ‘Oh, I can birdie these last two and do a little 59,’” said Saunders. “And No. 8 is a tough hole, so I was pleased to hit a good shot there and it felt good. It was fun to chase it and feel pretty good while I was doing it.”

Saunders’ tee shot at the par-3 eighth settled approximately 18 feet from the hole, and he converted the ensuing putt to reach 11-under on the par-71 layout, just one hole removed from a piece of golf history.

At the par-4 ninth, a pulled tee shot left gave way to a short wedge shot from the outcropping of trees, which nestled down 10 feet from the front-left hole location.

With a crowd of members and fans around the green and cheering from the club’s iconic halfway house, Pete’s Turn, Saunders delivered with one more birdie and a fist pump to match.

“It was dead center, I saw it going in from a few feet out,” he said.

With the round, Saunders joins Notah Begay III, Doug Dunakey, Jason Gore, Willy Wilcox and Russell Knox as players to shoot 59 in a [Web.com](#) Tour event. At the 2016 Ellie Mae Classic at TPC Stonebrae, Stephan Jaeger became the first player in history to record 58 in a PGA TOUR-sanctioned event.

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“Honestly, I was excited because my wife (Kelly) and my son Cohen (8), who is really getting into golf, got to watch. He’s only watched me play three full rounds of golf probably. He’s watched me fail in golf a lot, which is good, that’s a good lesson for him,” said Saunders. “For my wife Kelly to be there; she’s watched the ups and downs of this whole deal. I’m really glad that they got to be out there and watch me do that.”

Saunders spent the 2016-17 season on the PGA TOUR, where he finished No. 129 in the FedExCup standings after notching seven top-25 finishes, including a season-best T5 at the Puerto Rico Open in March. The 30-year-old recorded three of those top-25s in his last five starts of the season, but still wound up four spots shy of playing his way into the Playoffs.

With a return to the [Web.com](#) Tour Finals on the docket to secure his PGA TOUR status, Saunders opened with a T11 at the Nationwide Children’s Hospital Championship and a T40 at the Albertsons Boise Open before a missed cut at last week’s DAP Championship left him at No. 24 on the Finals-only money list entering the week.

“Today was about putting. I putted well. I’ve been hitting the ball pretty well and a couple of days ago I figured something out because I hadn’t been hitting it great,” Saunders said. “I’ve been pretty tired in these [Web.com](#) Tour Finals, so it was nice to get home and get some rest and not over-practice coming in. But, on Tuesday I had a really good warm up session and was able to figure things out. Like I said, it comes back to putting, and I made everything today. That’s how you go low.”

Saunders will begin second-round play at 8:35 a.m. (ET) on the front nine of Atlantic Beach, playing again with Wheatcroft as well as Japan’s Ryo Ishikawa. When asked of the difficulty of following a low round up with another one, Saunders brushed aside any pressure and welcomed the opportunity to play another home game.

“Tomorrow will really help with the familiarity of the golf course. I’m playing with my friends out here and this is a great place with a lot of good local people here – all the folks at the club and all of the neighbors watching,” he said. “I’m not going to be too stressed, hopefully have fun and shoot a low one tomorrow.”

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Wheatcroft and Matt Atkins finished the day with matching rounds of 9-under 62, three shots off of Saunders' torrid opening-round pace.

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