

Mickelson wins birdie-fest at SHO

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It was no time for flat-bellies on Sunday. And in the end, it was no time for anyone not named Phil Mickelson.

Aaron Baddeley, Chris Kirk, David Hearn and Anthony Kim all began play within two strokes of the lead, but when the bell rang it was Mickelson and fellow grizzled veteran Scott Verplank who answered. They swapped body blows as they tangoed across the greensward on a cloudy, magical Sunday afternoon.

In the end, Kirk caught Verplank to share second but by then Lefty had left everyone behind. Mickelson shot 65 to finish at 268, the lowest total since the Shell Houston Open moved to the Tournament Course at Redstone Golf Club in 2006. Mickelson, who had tied the course record of 63 the day before, played his final 36 holes in 16 under par, using only 52 putts.

It was a masterful performance by the defending Masters champion, who returns to Augusta with the wind in his sails. He had not won since claiming his third green jacket a year before.

As dominating as Mickelson was in the end, however, he had to summon all his considerable skill to hold Verplank at bay. The 46-year-old Texas native offered a convincing performance as a golfing Rocky, giving as good as he got for 13 holes. Verplank, who has five PGA Tour victories to his name despite the handicap of diabetes throughout his career, now plays with an ache in his left wrist, the result of a degenerative bone condition.

His wrist weakened as he came down the stretch, affecting both his full swing and his putting stroke. He birdied No. 13 to remain tied with Mickelson, dipping to six under par for the round. On the par 3 that followed, however, he missed a par putt from little more than tap-in range and fell a stroke behind. At No. 16, another par 3, Mickelson stuffed a 9 iron and made birdie to go 20 under, evoking a wild cheer, and Verplank found the bunker, came out poorly and took bogey to fall out of contention.

Considering his physical condition and his decided disadvantage in length off the tee, considering his lack of recent success and the few pressure situations he had experienced of late, Verplank's showing was a masterpiece of grit. He could not, however, claim a monopoly on our heartstrings.

Mickelson, always a favorite for his broad grin and the time and attention he devotes to fans, owns a special tie to Houston because his wife and his mother underwent simultaneous treatment for cancer here. Both are recovering well and one of their doctors followed him around the course this week. It was impossible to find anyone to root against.

“It’s been a really fun week,” Mickelson said, “and to spend some time with the people that helped us these last couple of years has been very special, too. They’re just incredible doctors that are at an amazing facility.”

To add still another layer of emotion, Verplank is a fast friend of Mickelson and his family and suffered with them through the cancer treatments.

“I love spending time with him,” Mickelson said. “We laugh a bunch and he’s certainly one of the guys I enjoy being around the most out on tour. We’ve played a bunch of rounds together and had a bunch of lunches and dinners. But we did not have the same banter today as we usually do in our practice rounds. We were both grinding and I kept making birdies and I wasn’t catching him. He just kept firing at it. Every time I felt like there was an opening, he sticks it three feet.”

In the department of strictly business, the golf was splendid. Mickelson chipped in for birdie to take a quick lead on No. 1 but then wired bogeys and Verplank made birdie and pulled two in front. Mickelson birdied the fourth and seventh and, beginning on No. 9, ran off five straight birdies. And still did not have the lead to himself.

Beginning on No. 6, Verplank birdied five of eight holes and stood even with Lefty at 19 under before he flinched – maybe “winced” is the word – on No. 14.

Mickelson, who won for the first time as a 40-year-old, claimed his 39th career victory with the best final round on tour this year. He goes to Georgia with the chance to reprise his 2006 feat – he won the Masters the week after taking the title at the Bell South Classic in Atlanta. And just in case there was any doubt, he proved he can still teach the kids a thing or two.

