

Hicks receiving stiff challenge from Gibson at Junior Classic

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By TRAVIS DOWNEY

Northwest Florida Daily News
315-4476 | travisd@nwfdailynews.com

FORT WALTON BEACH — Sarah Hicks' path to a third straight Marvin DeBolt Daily News Junior Golf Classic win hit an unexpected and unforeseen bump following Wednesday's opening round

And the obstacle's name is Kelsey Gibson.

Hicks, who has won the girls overall title each of the past two summers, fought through some early hiccups with her putting close to the day at 69 and headed to the clubhouse feeling confident about her position atop the leader board.

Only, she wasn't alone.

Gibson, a rising senior at King High just outside Tampa, was the day's biggest story, seemingly coming from out of nowhere to also score a 69 and enter today's final round deadlocked with Hicks for what should be an entertaining final day.

Hicks, Gibson and Ashleigh Ryals (70), who last year finished five strokes behind Hicks in second place, will make up the final threesome of the girls 15-18 division that tees off at 9:24 this morning from the 10th tee.

Having grown accustomed to not only the course, but also those she has shared it with over the past several years, Hicks admitted to being more than a little surprised by a player some simply referred to as "the new girl."

"That's not even fair, (Gibson) can't come all the way up here," Hicks joked. "There were some good scores up there. I've never heard of (Gibson). I wasn't expecting that."

It was only a week and a half ago that Gibson decided to enter the Classic. After spending much of the summer in various tournaments, Gibson had originally planned to visit family in Niceville to "take a week off," but when she missed the deadline for an upcoming qualifier she elected to register for the classic "just to keep playing."

So far, so good.

Gibson stood at 5-under through the first 13 holes before she hit a "stupid double" on 14 then regrouped to close strong.

"My idea for the day was go out and make a lot of pars and birdie the par five's," Gibson, who calls Thonotosassa home said. "I was pretty happy with it."

So too was Hicks, who shook off some early putting woes to finish three strokes better than she did a year ago despite entering this year's event largely dissatisfied with her most recent outings.

"I had been shooting in the 80s, which isn't me at all. Coming into today I thought, 'Par is good, bogey is fine,' " Hicks said. "Everybody has their ups and downs. Tomorrow I'm definitely going to have to work harder and push a little bit more."

Joanna Holt shot a 76 to close Day 1 at fourth while Summer Struzinski fired a personal-best round of 77 to round out the division's top five.

Madison Pacheco and Ivey Kelly turned in matching 82s to lead the 12-14 division with Rachel Struzinski (83) and Rebekah Pruett (84) right behind them.

Tanner Kilpatrick (40) led the 9-11 division, which consisted of boys and girls and was played over nine holes, with Luke Hambelton and A.J. Panyko second with matching 43s.