

Gibson edges 2-time winner Hicks for Junior Classic title

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FORT WALTON BEACH — The back nine of the Fort Walton Beach Pines course made for a beautiful setting for what turned out to be some dramatic golf theater during Thursday's finale of the 30th annual Marvin DeBolt Daily News Junior Golf Classic.

Classic newcomer Kelsey Gibson, who made an impromptu appearance from Tampa on Wednesday and fired a 69 to tie with two-time winner Sarah Hicks for the early lead, shot a second-round 68 — one better than Hicks and Ashleigh Ryals — to card a two-day score of 137 and capture this year's title.

"This was really some of the best competition and the closest (margin) I've won by in a really long time," said Gibson, who defeated Hicks by a single stroke. "This one was fun, it was challenging."

And it took the entire day before a clear winner could be crowned as Gibson, Hicks and Ryals entered the day's final hole, the par-4 No. 9, separated by only three total strokes.

Hicks' shot off the tee veered into the tree line, setting up a difficult approach to the green while both Gibson and Ryals landed shots in the middle of the fairway. Somehow, Hicks fired a second shot that landed softly on the green for what appeared to be a manageable — if not lengthy — putt for birdie and a possible playoff.

But Hicks' putt rolled past the hole, dashing her hopes at a playoff as well as her chance at a Classic-record third straight win. She finished one stroke back at 138 after consecutive 69s.

"I'll be honest, that was a pretty incredible shot," Hicks said. "I thought I made the putt, I thought I had it but I didn't. It fell on the wrong side of the hole."

Even Gibson, who tried to keep herself occupied during Hicks' putt, was secretly pulling for her competitor to come through.

"Honestly, I kind of wanted her to make it because I love playoffs," Gibson said. "I know she wouldn't believe me if I told her that, but I was kind of rooting for her."

"She hit a great shot out from behind a tree and I thought she deserved (a birdie)," Gibson added. "It was fun down to the last (hole)."

Adding to the drama was the soft-spoken Ryals, who after closing out Day 1 with a round of 70, tied Hicks with a 69 on Thursday to close the tournament in third with a 139.

It was Ryals that birdied on No. 7 and spent much of the day pressuring Gibson and Hicks.

"It's really rare to have two people right on your tail," Gibson said. "I knew (Ryals) was capable. They both played good, I just made one less mistake."

In the 12-14 division, Rachel Struzinski successfully followed in the footsteps of older sister, Summer, shooting an 80 on the day for a two-day score of 163 to take the title. Last year it was Summer, who finished sixth in the 15-18 division, who took top honors in the 12-14 grouping. After entering the day one stroke behind Day 1 leader Ivey Kelly, Rachel was eager to etch her own name in the record books.

Struzinski backed up Wednesday's 83 with a round of 80 on Thursday to complete the comeback.

"It means a lot," Struzinski said. "It feels amazing."

Kelly and Rebekah Pruettt each finished with a two-day score of 166, but it was Pruettt that finished second after winning the tie-breaker with a lower score over the back nine.

The 8-11 boys/girls division, played over 18 holes, also required the tiebreaker after champion A.J. Panyko and Tanner Kilpatrick both shot 81. Nolan Reming took third with an 82.