

James and Palubinski Outlast the Competition to Defend their Partners title.

By Julie Pelchar-Cohen

The round was like a reality show, and surviving a heatwave wasn't the only task for Rod James and Jared Palubinski. Consider their other challenges. A four-shot deficit. Down-the-stretch struggles. A three-way playoff. James and Palubinski outlasted all of the above to win a second straight Berks County Golf Association Partners Championship.

Affirmation was the pair's sweetest reward after defeating first-round leaders Dave Speece and Brent Wily and also Dan Fick and James Furness on the first hole of sudden death at Golden Oaks. "I feel like it validates that we're for real," Palubinski said, "that the first time around wasn't just a fluke."

Thursday's performance silenced doubters, if any existed after last summer's victory at Reading Country Club. This year, James and Palubinski defeated a team that tied the best round in tournament history during Wednesday's better ball. Speece and Wily fired a sizzling 10-under 62 that matched Ken and Jim Springer's first-day score at Galen Hall in 1988.



The steady James and Palubinski, who opened with a second-best 66, quickly gained two strokes Thursday with a pair of early birdies in the modified Chapman format. Palubinski made an 18-footer on 3. The partners two-putted for birdie on the par-5 fifth after James hit a 5-iron to 20 feet. After starting with six straight pars, Speece and Wily regained a stroke with a birdie on 7. But a two-shot swing on the par-3 9th shifted the momentum. The leaders bogeyed while James made a 15-footer to close within a stroke. "That's when I knew we had a shot," James said.

After the teams matched pars on the next five holes, James hit a second clutch bunker shot to win the par-3 15th and tie the leaders. "Rod's sand shots on 14 and 15 were huge," Palubinski said of the par saves. "We could've easily made bogeys there." Later, a three-putt by each pair left the teams deadlocked through 36 holes.

Speece and Wily bogeyed 17 to fall one back, but were given a second chance when James and Palubinski made a bogey of their own on 18. Meanwhile, Fick and Furness shot the day's low round (68) to tie the others at 8-under 136. But James and Palubinski made the playoff a short one. James hit a 8-iron to 4 feet on the par-4 first, and Palubinski sank the winning birdie to complete the comeback.

"I think it was harder," James said of their second win, "because we were four shots down." While the huge-hitting Speece and the consistent Wily were an unstoppable force Wednesday, they never found momentum during the final round. "It's bitter to me," Wily said. "It was there for us for the taking."

The victory would have been the second for the high school chums. They won in 1997 Partners and still manage to play the event often, even though Speece, [who maintains a residence in Berks County] has lived in China for more than a decade.

"It didn't go well early on, and we just never got things going," Speece said. "It's hard to pick up after a day like yesterday when everything went in."

