

# Nieporte keeps on catching up

■ SCORES, 11D

By MERI-JO BORZILLERI  
Herald Sports Writer

When John Nieporte tees it up this morning in the Florida Open final round, he'll be playing catch-up. But that's nothing new.

Nieporte's third-round 66 Friday put him five strokes behind leaders Brian Gay and Jimmy Stobs in the hunt for the state's premier title and a \$15,000 winner's purse at Palm Aire Country Club in Pompano Beach.

Gay, of Palm Beach Gardens, shot a 7-under 64 for a three-day 202 total. Miami Shores' Stobs, co-leader with Fort Lauderdale's Tim Balmer at the day's start, holed out from the bunker on 18 to tie Gay going into today's play on the Palms Course.

"It's going to be fun," Stobs said. "This is why I practice, why I play golf for a living. It's fun to compete, to have a chance to win."

Balmer's 71 put him at 208, six strokes back.

Nieporte, from Boca Raton, gained little ground on the leaders Friday. But playing from behind is almost second nature for the son of famed golf teacher and former PGA Tour pro Tom Nieporte.

Just about everyone he plays against these days has a jump on him. Most played in national junior tour events, went to big-name Division I schools or played prominent amateur tournaments.

## Gay, Stobs move into Open lead

Not Nieporte.

Nieporte, 31, didn't start playing golf seriously until his early 20s. He got his first clubs at 17.

"I wanted a set of clubs when I was 12 years old, and [my dad] wouldn't give them to me," said Nieporte, the eighth of nine siblings. "He wanted us to experience other sports."

Nieporte and his five sisters and three brothers did — swimming, tennis, soccer, baseball and football.

It shows. Three sisters got college tennis scholarships. Two brothers are golf teaching pros. Another, Jay, reached pro baseball's Double A level, playing in the San Diego Padres and L.A. Dodgers farm systems. He's now a manager at the famed Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, N.Y., where dad has been head pro for more than two decades.

To this day, the family has made a Christmas tradition of shooting free throws at their parents' Boca Raton winter home. Winner gets \$100. Patriarch pays. Nieporte played some golf in high school, but he played football better. Louisville offered the 6-3, 210-pound center a full scholarship. Florida, Florida State and Miami also recruited him.

Instead, Nieporte picked golf and Palm Beach Community Col-

lege, where he was promptly cut from the team after fall tryouts. He came back to earn a scholarship the next fall.

Nieporte calls his dad for advice after almost every round, even though the advice won't sound like much.

"Sixty-six?" he'll say. "Nie-

porte predicted for Friday night's call. "That's a great round. Keep it going..."

Next week presents another challenge when Nieporte plays in the second round of PGA Tour qualifying school.

"I used to think, 'Oh my gosh, I've got so much catching up to do,'" he said, "but it's not so much where you've been, it's where you're going."

# Stirring finish keeps Singh atop Tour field

■ SCORES, 11D

From Herald Staff and Wire Reports

Vijay Singh experienced the best and the worst East Lake Golf Club had to offer on Friday. When his wild ride was over, he was right back where he started — atop the leaderboard at the Tour Championship in Atlanta.

One day after his course-record 63, Singh recovered from a disastrous start with birdies on six of the last 13 holes for an even-par 70 that put him at 7-under 133 and gave him a two-stroke lead over Jim Furyk.

"What a comeback by Vijay," said Tom Lehman, four strokes off the lead after a 71. "It just shows that if you're not hitting it quite right, you can make big numbers. And if you're hitting good shots, you can make birdies."

"Singh did a little of both on a day in which the pendulum swung wildly in both directions."

When he started the second round on another sunny afternoon with slightly stronger winds, he

## ROUNDUP

seventh victory of the year, shot a 66 and was tied for the lead with Ed Dougherty and Joe Inman after the opening round of the Pacific Bell Seniors Classic.

■ The U.S. LPGA tour team took a narrow lead over Japan in the Nichirei International tournament in Ina, Japan, winning five of nine opening-round matches.

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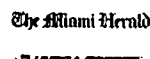
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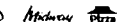
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