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GOLF

Hoch might not defend title

4-24-02

By **TODD GRAFF**, Staff Writer
 News & Record

GREENSBORO -- A year ago, Scott Hoch couldn't see much rough at Forest Oaks Country Club and nearly withdrew from the Greater Greensboro Chrysler Classic.

This year, Hoch can't see much, period. And his vision problems might not allow him to defend his title.

Hoch, the 46-year-old Raleigh native, has had complications from laser eye surgery recently, prompting a third procedure on his right eye Monday in Washington, D.C., to fix his vision and a recently discovered astigmatism.

Hoch's vision was blurry Tuesday, and he was struggling with depth perception. It kept him from hitting practice balls Tuesday, and he will decide later today whether he'll have the chance to become the first player other than Sam Snead to defend his title in Greensboro.

If Hoch is unable to play, he would be the first champion of Greensboro's PGA Tour stop who did not compete the next year since 1993 winner Rocco Mediate missed the '94 event while recovering from back surgery.

"If I went and tried to hit a ball now, I might hit behind it and bounce all the way over it," said Hoch, a former Wake Forest star. "It would be just muscle memory that would allow me to hit the ball today. It feels really odd.

"When I woke up, I said, 'Uh-oh, I'm not seeing like I did the other two times I had the surgery.' My depth perception is way off. They just kind of overcooked it."

Hoch plans to see an optometrist in Greensboro this morning, although that may have little effect on his decision to play. He tried wearing glasses on the practice green last week in Hilton Head but found no relief.

Hoch's doctor has recommended contact lenses, but because of Monday's surgery, he wouldn't be able to adjust or remove the contacts himself.

"I don't see doing alternative things to be able to play one week," said Hoch, the No.



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24-ranked golfer in the world. "Wearing glasses is different and wearing contacts is different. Even though you might be able to see, it changes your depth perception.

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"I knew this was a possibility, but the alternative wasn't very good, either."

It was a year ago Hoch complained about the short rough at Forest Oaks, then walked off with the GGCC title five days later. He jumped into the lead with a third-round 67 and held off Brett Quigley by one shot for his first title in four years.

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Hoch first underwent laser eye surgery in January 2001, and when he took his yearly checkup three months ago, there were no problems.

But Hoch, the seventh-leading money winner in PGA Tour history, started experiencing problems at last month's Players Championship, a couple of weeks after he started taking Lipator, a drug designed to reduce cholesterol. If he could have made a few of his birdie putts on Sunday afternoon, he might have walked off with the TPC title.

"At the TPC, I wasn't able to see very well," Hoch said. "That ended up being a good excuse for my putting, but a lot of things weren't right with my eyesight. Things were really out of kilter."

It got worse a week later in Houston, when his vision was so blurry he couldn't chip or putt. He called his doctor, Mark Whitten, after missing the cut that Friday and had laser procedures on both eyes the following Monday.

His vision was fine for nearly two weeks, but problems arose in his right eye at last week's WorldCom Classic. He flew to Washington on Monday for surgery on the right eye.

"It was a decision I had to make," he said. "I knew I couldn't play here the way it was during the last week."

Contact Todd Graff at 373-7370 or tgraff@news-record.com

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