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**Junior Amateur Championship:
One major score for Craig Benson's Golf Club of New England as Stratham course is first in state to host a USGA championship**



Golf Club of New England owner Craig Benson looks out onto the greening Stratham course as he discusses the upcoming USGA Junior Amateur Championship in July. The Golf Club of New England is the first in the state to host a USGA championship event, Benson said



The Golf Club of New England will host the USGA Junior Amateur Championship on their expansive course from July 16-21. The event will allow members of the public to experience both the private course and the international golf championship free of charge. The 13th hole of the course is pictured here.

By GRETYL MACALASTER

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STRATHAM

FROM JULY 16-21, the Golf Club of New England will be host to the U.S. Golf Association's Junior Amateur Championship.

It is the first time a golf club in New Hampshire has hosted any USGA championship event, and the junior championship is considered one of the most difficult to win.

It is an honor that club owner, former Gov. Craig Benson, and his staff, including superintendent Jeff Baker, are taking very seriously.

Baker is no stranger to championships, having maintained the course ahead of the Ryder Cup in 1999 as superintendent of The Country Club in Brookline, Mass., one of the five founding clubs of the USGA and one of the nation's oldest golf courses.

Benson said having Baker on staff helped them "jump the line" in hosting the event.

Only 13 USGA championships are held in the country each year. "There are a lot of venues so getting picked was terrific," Benson said.

He said the USGA has to be sure to pick a venue that can handle the event, which brings hundreds of young golfers, their parents and coaches, other staff and media to the area for about two weeks. The event itself lasts five days.

The Golf Club of New England is situated on 441 acres between Stratham, Greenland and North Hampton and features beautiful woods, sparkling ponds and is over 7,500 yards long. It is bordered on three sides by the Winnicut River and is "mammoth" by golf course standards, Benson said. One hole by itself sits on 25 acres, which is the size of some entire golf courses in the state, he said.

The course was designed by golf legend Arnold Palmer and opened in September 2002.

Since then, the course has been host to six USGA qualifying events, as well as a number of charity golf events. The private club has about 90 members.

"It will accommodate a championship event and not many golf courses in New Hampshire can do that," Benson said.

The U.S. Junior Amateur Championship allows the public to walk the stunning course with the world's finest up-and-coming golfers, free of charge, said club spokesman Scott Tranchemontagne of Montagne Communications.

Tiger Woods won the Junior Championship three times.

Adding to the allure of the New Hampshire event will be the appearance of Keene's own Chelso Barrett, who placed second in the Junior Amateur Championship last year, giving him an exemption into this year's competition.

Registrations are not due until May, but Tranchemontagne said they have every expectation that Barrett will participate in July.

A total of 156 male golfers under the age of 18 will participate in the first two-day field event, before they are whittled down to 64 players for match play. A coinciding tournament for girls under 18 is being held in Daly City, Calif., at the Merced Country Club.

Baker said the players golf 36 holes a day, which in and of itself is impressive.

"They play a lot of great golf courses, wherever they are from, and this is going to rank right up there in terms of quality from the first tee to the 18th hole," said Greg Smith, head professional at the club.

Benson said it is about a five-year process to be considered for a championship venue and includes looking at surrounding infrastructure, not just the course.

Close to 300 hotel rooms in the Portsmouth area have been blocked off for the event, and Tranchemontagne said local restaurants and businesses will benefit as well.

"Like any other major event, it will bring a lot of excitement, but also real revenue into the state," he said.

Benson said a golf club hosting a championship event just nine years after opening is almost an unheard-of story, as golf is steeped in tradition and history.

"They don't let many younger golf courses break into the scene," Benson said. "But we really were able to elevate the positioning of the Golf Club of New England based on the product and what's out here."

In addition to being free and open to the public, the event also calls for hundreds of volunteers.

Additional information about the club and the U.S. Junior Amateur Championship is available at golfclubne.com.