



Golf: U.S. Juniors coming to New Hampshire

On Golf
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The Golf Club of New England in Stratham, N.H., is hosting the 65th U.S. Junior Championships beginning July 16.

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STRATHAM, N.H. — As the bulldozers and developers tore 450 pristine acres of prime farmland and woods into 18 holes of golf paradise 10 years ago, few could have had an idea like this.

Governor Craig Benson's wheels already were spinning, though.

"Arnold Palmer designed this to be a championship golf course," said Rye's Benson, the New Hampshire governor from 2003 to 2005.

The former legislator and Cabletron mogul's vision, along with the United States Golf Association's desire to spread championship golf to each state have brought us to this. Come July 16, Benson's Golf Club of New England will host the 65th United States Junior Championship.

"The goal has always been to host a major USGA championship here," said Benson. "Finally, it's starting to look real and take shape here. And we're just starting to see the pride here in what we've put into this."

A field of 160 of the world's best juniors — culled from over 8,000 original qualifiers — will invade the seacoast and attempt to solve this 7,175-yard Palmer-designed monster/gem.

Granite State sensation and 2011 runner-up Chelso Barrett of Keene headlines the field. Recent U.S. Open contenders Beau Hossler, 17, of California, and Andy Zhang, 14, of Florida, will likely cause a stir.

The local hopes will be well-represented as Windham High School junior Connor Greenleaf, a two-time Eagle-Tribune All-Star, slugs it out with the very best.

The event opens with two rounds of medal play here, followed by a cut to the top 64 and head-to-head matches from there until a champion is crowned.

Five years in the making

It was just about five years ago when the USGA first expressed its desire to bring a major championship event to New Hampshire for the first time.

Five courses, including the Atkinson Country Club and Resort, made the short list. But Benson, always a mover and shaker, made sure that the Golf Club of New England would not be denied.

His club, located just off I-95, did not have as he said, the "100-year pedigree or the history and the jackets."

But what GCNE lacked in a resume, it more than made up for with character, challenge and conditions.

A championship like the US Junior Championship takes more than just a golf course. It takes people.

"Fortunately, our membership (about 100 members) has embraced the idea," said Benson. "Just about all of them will be among our volunteers, who right about now number about 500."

The infrastructure here was well in place, too. The greater Portsmouth area possessed the 2,000 or so hotel rooms needed to run the event.

Benson's group went on the offensive to be sure that every other potential hurdle could be cleared.

"We left no stone unturned," said Benson.

The pre-tournament dinner was a challenge.

"This is a formal event for about 550 people on the weekend before the tournament," said Benson. "No place around here was large enough to handle a crowd of that size."

But the Granite Staters, showing the best in Yankee ingenuity, improvised.

A friend/business associate in the corporate jet rental business owns a giant hangar at the Pease Tradeport.

"The place is beautiful," said Benson, noting that it's so big that they will only be using half the facility.

A couple state-of-the-art jets will be parked inside and a couple giant U.S. military tankers will be pulled aside the outside of the hangar as well, turning the event into formal dinner with a twist - as a mini-air show.

The USGA forced the Granite Staters to stick to detail, right down to the 300 signs needed to be ordered.

Signs will not read "1st tee," they will read "First tee." Tee times won't be starting at "7 AM," they will start at "7 a.m."

"The USGA is there to advise us, and they are sticklers," said Benson. "We've learned to work well together with them. And that will go a long way to make this a wonderful event."

The course itself

Benson chose the legendary Palmer to help design the course. Palmer's vision was brought to fruition by course builder and current superintendent Jeff Baker.

Baker has been the assistant superintendent at The Country Club in Brookline, overseeing that storied club's hosting of the U.S. Women's Amateur and the Ryder Cup.

If you get the chance to play GCNE or you come out for the U.S. Juniors, you'll notice the subtle Baker touches. His use of fescue to frame the outline of the many bunkers dotting the course are a pure "TCC in Brookline" touch, a link to golf's historic past despite the fact that this club is a decade old.

Fan-friendly event

Benson says he expects 5,000-10,000 fans for the week-long event and his club is ready.

"That's the beauty of this event. The USGA mandates that all spectators are welcome free of charge," said Benson. "It's a great opportunity for fans to come out, again for free, to the best young players in the game up close."

A large number of future PGA pros, all under the age of 18, will be playing in the event.

Parking will be available on site and in a satellite lot with shuttle buses running regularly from the Target Plaza in Greenland.

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