

Best amateur golfers in world to tee off in Stratham

Benson: Youth championship can be a transformative event



Sandtraps along the 13th hole at the Golf Club of New England are sure to challenge the teenaged golfers competing this week in the U.S. Junior Amateur in Stratham.



The Golf Club of New England will host the U.S. Junior Am.

By Mike Zhe

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STRATHAM — For elite politicians, trips to New Hampshire have long been essential. For elite young golfers, not so much.

Until now.

Starting Monday, the Granite State can cross another item off its bucket list, as it begins hosting a U.S. Golf Association championship — the 65th U.S. Junior Amateur — for the first time ever. After next week, only Alaska will have never hosted one.

The private Golf Club of New England is the site for 156 of the world's best golfers under age 18, not to mention the projected 2,000 to 3,000 fans per day, who can attend the week-long event free of charge.

"It's transformed the golf club," said former Gov. Craig Benson, who is serving as the tournament's honorary chairman. "It's going to transform the area. A lot of people are coming to the area to participate or to watch. ...; I think (attendance) is going to be pretty heavy."

The club had the feel of a small city on Saturday, with players arriving, checking in and taking the par-72 course for official practice rounds. Flags representing the nine countries of the players — the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, China, India, Korea and Saudi Arabia — flew atop the main scoreboard across from the practice green.

Hundreds of fans were on hand, even if most didn't recognize the majority of the names in the field. The exceptions include Beau Hossler, a 17-year-old from California who contended in last month's U.S. Open; Jim Liu, who won this event in 2010; and Chelso Barrett, a 17-year-old Keene resident who was a finalist in this tournament last year.

"You're going to see kids that, 10 years from now, are going to be on the (PGA) tour," Benson said. "Not even 10 years."

Hossler will be in the final threesome on Monday with 16-year-old Connor Greenleaf of Windham, the only other New Hampshire player in the field. They'll tee off at 2 p.m.

In addition to top-quality golf, the area is expected to see a tourism boost as thousands of golfers and golf fans stay on the Seacoast, many of them for the first time ever.

Doug Bates, president of the Greater Portsmouth Chamber of Commerce, said Friday that all downtown hotels were booked for the coming week. It's also good news for the city's restaurants and other attractions.

"Any time there's a big, nationally-known event, we draw a big crowd," Bates said.

The championship is open to any player who owns a handicap of 6.4 or better and will not turn 18 before this July 21. Local qualifying was held at 63 sites across the country in recent weeks, with 2,941 golfers competing for a spot in the field at GCNE.

It's been an even longer road for the host club, an Arnold Palmer Group design that opened in 2003 and was promptly dubbed the "Millionaires' Club" for its roster of affluent members. Due in part to a lack of members, the club declared bankruptcy the next year and was ultimately purchased by Benson's Soft Draw Investments.

Since then, the club has showed itself off by hosting several USGA qualifiers, as well as the New Hampshire Mid-Amateur in 2005 and the N.H. Women's Amateur in 2011. Next summer it will host the N.H. Men's Amateur.

"We've been trying to do this for five years," Benson said. "Generally, they (the USGA) want to go with a long pedigree or history. We were able to prove to them we were capable of doing what needed to be done."

The USGA was also eager to bring this championship back to the Northeast for the first time since it was at Longmeadow (Mass.) Country Club in 2005.

"Every golf club has the dream of hosting a major championship," said Jeff Altstadter, media relations manager of the USGA, "but few are able to do it."

A big reason was the course, one of the lengthiest in the state, which will play at just under 7,200 yards to give today's long-hitting juniors a solid test.

"The hardest stretch of holes are holes 15 through 18, which will have water hazards on every one of those holes that will come into play," said Greg Sanfilippo, tournament director for the USGA. "Strokes will be lost and matches will be won."

Golfers will play medal-play rounds on Monday and Tuesday. The low 64 players advance to match play, which begins Wednesday. There will be two more rounds of match play both Thursday and Friday, with the 36-hole final slated for Saturday.

It should be a quite a week for golf. And for New Hampshire.

"People should realize that this is a real national championship," Benson said. "And, with the flags on top of the scoreboard, you see it's more than just national. It's going to be one heck of a golf tournament."

GO & DO

65th U.S. Junior Amateur golf championship

When: Monday to Saturday

Where: Golf Club of New England, Stratham

Cost: Admission is free all days; parking is free on site with courtesy shuttles running to course

Web: www.golfclubne.com

<http://www.seacoastonline.com/articles/20120715-NEWS-207150349?cid=sitesearch>