

Wednesday, July 18, 2012

New Hampshire players change places at Junior Am golf

To say Connor Greenleaf has a flare for the dramatic might be an understatement.

On Monday the 16-year-old Windham High School junior outplayed the hottest junior golf commodity in the country, U.S. Open phenom Beau Hossler.

On Tuesday, on the 18th hole, with his goal of reaching match play in his first U.S. Junior Amateur very much in doubt, Greenleaf rolled home a 20-foot birdie putt.

It came on the heels of a double bogey on the extremely tricky par-3 17th, which put Greenleaf six-over for the tournament. At that point he didn't know what it would take to qualify.

"I said to my brother, if I make this that would be insane," Greenleaf said. "I wanted to make par. I thought even that would get me into match play, but I read it right and had the perfect amount of speed and it stayed straight."

It turns out Greenleaf was right about the cut. The wind kicked up in the afternoon and so did the scores. The cut actually came at nine over, with three golfers, 2010 winner Jim Liu of Smithtown, N.Y., tying Shintaro Ban of San Jose and Nicolas Echavarria of Columbia for low score at three-under 141.

Liu is playing in his fourth U.S. Amateur and is eligible to play again next year. He was the youngest player in history to win two years ago, breaking the record set by Tiger Woods, who won at 15. He's already committed to Wood's Alma mater. He'll be in Stanford's class of 2017.

A victory would tie him with Woods for the most U.S. Junior Am titles in history (two), with a chance to make it three next year.

"My game is there," Liu said, "I just have to put all the pieces of the puzzle together and I hope it happens this week."

Like Monday, Tuesday was a tale of two New Hampshire golfers, the one who reached the finals last year, and the kid hoping to make a name for himself.

Did the burden of expectations do in Keene's Chelso Barrett, last year's finalist, or was it simply the greens at Golf Club of New England?

Whatever it was, Barrett made just one birdie in his two qualifying rounds and finished 10 over and out of the money.

“I figured I needed two birdies on the last three holes to have a chance,” Barrett said. “Obviously, it didn’t work out that way.”

It sure didn’t. Barrett had a triple bogey on 16 that seemed to put him out of contention. He hit his tee shot in deep fescue alongside a fairway bunker, had to punch out, and needed two chips from behind the green get on and two putts to finish the nightmare. He had another triple bogey on Monday.

But when the afternoon round was over and scores escalated, it turned out Barrett missed the cut by just one stroke.

“I hit it awful,” Barrett said. “I don’t know if I had felt completely comfortable, which I didn’t, it wouldn’t have made a difference because I didn’t have my best game this week.”

Barrett will move on to a U.S. Amateur qualifier and the Junior PGA Championship in Fort Wayne, Ind. If he misses qualifying for the U.S. Amateur, he might play in a British junior event in August. By then he should be ready for his final high school season.

Greenleaf, meanwhile, will attempt to become this year’s Chelso Barrett.

Hossler is still alive, but not feeling nearly as confident as he appeared at a press conference on Sunday.

He was in danger of missing the cut after a birdie-less round of 77 on Monday, but regained some of his magic on Tuesday to shoot a 71 and make the cut at four over.

“This is the worst putting tournament I’ve had in my junior golf career,” Hossler said. “I haven’t sniffed reading a game so far.”

He took a drastic step, changing putters on Tuesday and going with a longer, belly-style putter, which, according to his caddie, doesn’t actually come in contact with his belly.

The real fun at the Golf Club of New England, which is drawing rave reviews, starts Wednesday with 32 first-round matches. It concludes Saturday with two players battling it out for 36 holes.

Gary Fitz can be reached at 594-6469 or gfitz@nashuatelegraph.com. Follow him on Twitter (@Telegraph_GaryF).

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