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A loss, but Windham's Greenleaf is no loser at Junior Am

Gary Fitz

Windham's Connor Greenleaf has played a lot of golf in the last month.

The 16-year-old junior at Windham High School went from a tournament in Providence R.I., to the U.S. Junior Worlds at Torrey Pines, near San Diego.

As soon as he got home there were practice rounds to be played at the Golf Club of New England in preparation for this week's U.S. Junior Amateur.

In the biggest tournament of his life, Greenleaf realized his pre-tournament goal, to have one of the top 64 scores of the 156 top junior golfers from around the world and qualify for match play.

Wednesday, in his opening match, Greenleaf took a two-hole lead after three holes against Victor Wiggins of Gastonia, N.C.

Then things began to go awry for the only New Hampshire player left in the first USGA event ever held in the state. By the 12th hole, he was three down.

He rallied to pull back within one, but got a little too aggressive on his second shot at 16 and wound up two down with two left. When he conceded a par to Wiggins on the par-3 17th, his magical week and seemingly non-stop run of golf was over. What would he do next?

"The next few days I'll probably put the clubs away and relax a little," Greenleaf said. "Tomorrow's the first day in a long time I'll have a chance to do anything I want."

And what will that be?

"Sleep in," Greenleaf said, "then get together with friends I haven't seen in a long, long time."

What will he do with his friends, some of whom are fellow golfers?

"Maybe I'll go play nine tomorrow," Greenleaf said, conceding that walking away from the game, even for 24 hours, probably wasn't going to happen.

Greenleaf's quick, early lead Wednesday probably served a necessary wake-up call for Wiggins, who turned a two-hole deficit into a one-hole lead on the final five holes of the front nine.

Then Wiggins went 2-up on 10 and 3-up on 12, making a testing par putt after Greenleaf rolled in a 25-footer for bogey.

Can you lose a hole and still gain a little momentum?

“To finally make a long putt felt good,” Greenleaf said. “Just to have him have to make a putt instead of walking off the hole told me I was still in the match.”

Greenleaf won the next two holes, then made a par-saving downhill 10-footer to stay just one back on the par-5 15th. A good tee shot on the par 4 16th put him in position for an aggressive second shot. But maybe he was too aggressive.

The pin was tucked in the left corner with a lateral hazard just off the green. Greenleaf’s shot hit the green then spun off into the hazard.

“I thought I hit the shot but I over cooked it,” Greenleaf said. “I aimed to the right and hoped it would draw in.

“I aimed more right than I needed too and over compensated by hitting a bigger draw. I just hooked it too much.”

So New Hampshire’s last hope at the biggest golf tournament in state history was two down with two to play. When he missed a birdie putt at 17, with Wiggins inches from the cup for his par, it was time for a handshake.

“I’m proud of myself already,” Greenleaf said. “I made the cut and today I said I should have as much fun as I can.

“I was three down and I gave him a run at the end. I could have won it, but I came out of here giving it a good try and I had fun the entire time.”

Sadly, not too many golfers will leave Stratham this week, having just lost a match, with the same attitude.

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

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