

Kelley gives Liu helping hand at Junior Am

Portsmouth CC member caddying for tourney favorite



Jim Liu (right) of Smithtown, N.Y., hits from the fairway on the first hole during first-round match play at the U.S. Junior Amateur championship on Wednesday at The Golf Club of New England in Stratham. At left is Liu's caddy, four-time Seacoast Amateur champion Neil Kelley.

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July 20, 2012 2:00 AM

STRATHAM — When Neil Kelley signed up to be a caddy for the U.S. Junior Amateur Championship, he had no idea which golfer he'd be assigned. The same went for Jim Liu, one of the tournament favorites who signed up for a local caddy only when his sister, Jing, had to cancel for a work conflict.

Paired together at random, both Liu and Kelley are feeling like they hit the lottery.

With Kelley — a member of the Portsmouth Country Club and a four-time champion of the Seacoast Am — on his bag, Liu medaled in stroke play and on Thursday reached the match play quarterfinals at the Golf Club of New England.

"When I first got on site, everyone told me that I got the best caddy here," Liu said. "So that was kind of a plus. He's great. He's been a great supporter. He knows exactly what to do out there, and I'm going to rely on him for the rest of the week."

It's already been a long one for Liu, the top stroke play qualifier who won a pair of matches Thursday. In the morning session, he fired six birdies but still had to go to 17 holes to finish off James Riley, 2 and 1. In the afternoon, Liu advanced with a 3 and 1 win over Eric Ricard, who conceded the 17th after firing two tee shots out of play.

Liu will face California's Nicolo Galletti in the quarterfinals today at 8 a.m. Should he advance, his semifinal match is scheduled to follow at 1 p.m.

"I'm going to go back and get some rest, that's the first thing," Liu said of his mindset. "Hopefully it will be another long day. You've just got to pace yourself out there. You're going to hit bad shots, but it's how you handle your missed opportunities."

Liu has been a model of self control in this tournament and credits Kelley for helping his confidence. Kelley said he knew all about Liu's junior career and has enjoyed his time with the 16-year-old star.

"He's a tremendous kid," Kelley said. "They don't need a lot of help. Maybe a little bit around the greens. We do the best we can, but these kids have it figured out. It doesn't take them long. They have the practice rounds and they map it out, they know where they want to hit it. And they can do it."

The greens are where the pair do the majority of their communicating on the course, sometimes with a simple exchange of hand gestures. Sometimes Kelley leans over Liu's shoulder as he squats to read the break, a routine Liu does on each hole. Other times, they face one another from opposite sides of the hole to get a better perspective.

"He's been a lot of help, especially reading these greens," Liu said. "He has a lot of local knowledge. And he knows when to say something and when not to. He does that perfectly. So he's helped my confidence a lot and it should be the same way the rest of the week."

Liu has become well known on the junior circuit for his ability to pile up birdies, and his steady play on the tough greens at the Golf Club of New England has been a driving force in this deep tournament run.

Perhaps no moment told the story better than on Thursday afternoon, when after rolling in a 15-footer for birdie on 14, Ricard pulled out his driver and began walking alone up to the 15th tee. As Liu coolly swept home his own birdie putt to halve the hole, Ricard, peaking back to see his fate, slumped his shoulders and continued on, as if his best chance to square the match and gain some momentum had passed.

Ricard yanked his tee shot on 15 into the thicket, double-bogeyed the hole and fell 2-down with three to play.

"I wouldn't say that's where I (won) the match," Liu said of the moment, "but it definitely helped me with my confidence going into the last couple holes. That's a tough stretch of holes. There's water everywhere and you've got to hit it real well."

Liu's confidence continues to grow with every round. He said the once foreign course located out in the Stratham farmlands "kind of feels like home" entering today's action.

The addition of Kelley to his bag as been a major factor.

His caddy could, of course, have been his sister.

"I'm lucky that I got the better end of the draw," Liu said with a laugh.

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