

Comeback kid Shim stuns Liu in Junior Am final

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New Hampshire Union Leader
July 21, 2012



Andy Hyeon Bo Shim, of Duluth, Ga., pumps his fist after sinking a put to win the 22nd hole of Saturday's Junior Am final at the Golf Club of New England in Stratham. (JOSH GIBNEY/UNION LEADER)

STRATHAM — At lunch time on Saturday, things looked dark indeed for Andy Hyeon Bo Shim at the U.S. Junior Amateur. But by late afternoon, the 17-year-old South Korean golfer was the toast of the Seacoast after authoring a comeback for the ages.

Five down to Jim Liu after 18 holes of the scheduled 36-hole final at the Golf Club of New England, Shim roared back in the afternoon to score a stunning, 4-and-3 upset victory over Liu, a 16-year-old who was seeking to become only the third player to win multiple U.S. Junior titles.

The 43rd seed in the match-play draw, Shim made three birdies and an eagle in the first 10 holes of the afternoon round while the top-seeded Liu, who had played near-flawless golf all week, suddenly lost his mojo. The winner of the 2010 U.S. Junior at 14 and one of three golfers to share medalist honors this year, Liu struggled to find fairways in the afternoon and paid the price with five bogeys and a double bogey over the last 15 holes.

While denying Liu a piece of history, Shim made some of his own. His comeback from 5 holes down in a U.S. Junior final was the biggest in tournament history, surpassing the record of 4 holes down set multiple times.

Shim's unlikely rise and Liu's surprising crash made for great theater over the 7,175-yard layout, ending with the winner fulfilling what he called a dream come true. A Duluth, Ga., resident who came to the United States with his parents three years ago to pursue a golf career, Shim arrived in Stratham unheralded, despite having won three American Junior Golf Association tournaments and the 2012 Georgia state junior crown.

Despite the gaping deficit he faced after the morning round, he didn't allow himself to become discouraged.

"I knew (Liu) was a great player," Shim said. "I was just thinking if I could just shoot about 4 under or 5 under, I'd think I was going to come back a little bit and just see how it goes."

Shim realized his vision, sandwiching birdies on the 21st, 27th and 28th holes around a dramatic eagle at the 22nd. After an up-and-down morning round that included six scores of bogey or worse, his only bogey of the afternoon came on the last hole, which he halved with Liu to win the match.

Putting trouble in the past, it seemed, was the key to Shim's victory.

"I just kept thinking about just one shot ahead," he said. "The before holes, I just don't even remember."

As Shim plowed blissfully forward despite troublesome foot blisters that required periodic treatment during the match, Liu crumbled under the weight of expectation. A Smithtown, N.Y., resident of Chinese descent, he has worked with two of Tiger Woods' former swing coaches and plans to play golf at Stanford, just like the 14-time major winner. But despite a sterling resume that includes the formidable feat of being the youngest U.S. Junior winner ever, his collapse Saturday afternoon recalled the epic tumble of Greg Norman at the 1996 Masters.

A dastardly hook off the tee crept into Liu's repertoire after the lunch break. He missed the first five fairways left, allowing Shim to gain momentum. Shim won No. 19 with a par and drained a 6-footer for birdie at No. 21 to cut Liu's lead to 3 up. Shim then drove the green at the 22nd — a par-4 played from a forward tee measuring 287 yards in the championship match — and drained an 8-foot eagle putt to draw within two.

On the 23rd, Liu's drive carried into thick woods left of the fairway and was deemed lost, leading to a double bogey. Shim's conceded par on the hole cut Liu's lead to just 1 up.

After the players halved the 24th with pars, Shim drew even with a scrambling par at the 25th, where he got up and down from 100 yards after driving into a bunker while Liu bogeyed. And thanks to dramatic putts at Nos. 26 and 27 — a 5-footer for par on the former and a 30-foot birdie bomb on the latter — Shim started the final nine with a 2-up lead.

Shim's cushion became 3 up when he drained a 12-foot birdie putt at the 28th hole after Liu grazed the lip with his birdie effort. And he increased it to 4 up with an up-and-down par at the 30th.

Needing only to halve the 33rd hole to win, Shim drove into the right woods on Golf Club of New England's 15th. But with the door open, Liu responded by hooking his tee shot into a hazard left of the fairway. After Shim pitched out and made bogey, Liu's last-gasp par putt to stay alive burned the left edge.

Afterward, Liu faced up to his failure with admirable candor.

"You've got to expect the worst in golf, because that's just golf," he said. "The more you get down on yourself, if you think you caught unlucky breaks, the worse you'll play. So I try to keep a positive mindset, and I was able to do that, but my game just didn't show up. Now I know what I need to keep working on."

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