

Kelley, Wilson enjoy supporting roles at U.S. Junior Am

Local golf standouts caddy for top juniors

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STRATHAM — When it comes to the annual Seacoast Amateur tournament, golfers Neil Kelley of Hampton and Brett Wilson of Dover have been two of the better players, with six titles between them.

They're also two of the more outgoing players. It's hard to picture them walking together for 18 holes — or, in this case, 33 holes — and not trading a few stories or jokes.

But that's pretty much what happened Saturday in the climax of the U.S. Junior Amateur championship at the Golf Club of New England, with both focused squarely on the fortunes of the players they were respectively helping out.

With Wilson caddying for eventual champion Andy Hyeon Bo Shim, and Kelley on the bag of his opponent, Jim Liu, the two local standouts embraced their roles as the supporting cast, transferring their local knowledge to two of the best young players in the world.

"It was unbelievable," said Wilson. "It was more fun than golf itself."

The 17-year-old Shim, who was born in Korea but now lives in Duluth, Ga., found himself 5-down after the first 18 holes but staged the biggest comeback in U.S. Junior Amateur final history, winning nine of the next 12 holes and closing out Liu — and Kelley — on the 15th hole for a 4-and-3 win.

He also praised Wilson, whom he'd met for the first time nine days ago and, as a volunteer, has been on his bag all week.

"If he wasn't my caddy, I think I'd miss the cut for sure," said Shim. "He helped me; his reading greens was perfect. ... I'd think a putt was going right and he'd say it's going to go left. I just trusted him."

Wilson got an e-mail before the tournament, notifying him of his assignment. Shim was the first player to arrive on the grounds here two Fridays ago — getting to the range at 7 a.m. — and he and Wilson, the last man to win back-to-back Seacoast Am championships (in 2007 and '08), played a practice round together later that day.

"First time walking on the golf course he hit it close and made seven birdies," said Wilson. "I could tell then."

Shim closed things out Saturday with his putting, making four putts of 10 feet or longer in the first 10 holes of the afternoon session to overtake Liu, the champion of this event in 2010.

The 16-year-old Liu had similar praise for Kelley, a four-time Seacoast Am champ, telling the Portsmouth Herald earlier this week, "He has a lot of local knowledge. And he knows when to say something and when not to. He does that perfectly."

Just another story the two local guys can retell over a beverage after a future Seacoast Am round.

"Neil and I get along very well," said Wilson. "I think we were both thrilled to have the opportunity to see these players doing these amazing things."

Supporting cast

Hundreds of spectators walked the fairways with the final match, ringing the greens two and three deep on a hot, sunny morning and afternoon.

Craig Benson, the former New Hampshire governor who served as honorary chairman this week, said he was pleased with the overall attendance. Spectators could attend the tournament free of charge.

"Twice what they had last year," he noted, "but you always want more."

At the awards ceremony that followed the championship match, Benson was presented a framed scroll, a thank-you from the USGA for the job his club and its many volunteers did hosting the event, the first USGA championship to ever be played in New Hampshire.

"It's a great event and I'll remember it for the rest of my life," said Benson.

Chip shots

Craig Steckowych of Greenland, who led the New England Amateur this week after an opening-round 65, served as volunteer coordinator for the tournament. ...; The work of course superintendent Jeff Baker also drew kudos. "The course was exactly the way we wanted it," said Geoff Yang, chairman of the tournament for the USGA. "It played firm. It played fast. It played fair." ...; GCNE will host the New Hampshire Amateur next July. The 2013 U.S. Junior Amateur will be played at the Martis Camp Club in Truckee, Calif.

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