

Aussie Lukas Michel Makes U.S. Mid-Amateur History with Title at Colorado Golf Club

By David Shefter, USGA

What Happened

The Robert T. Jones Jr. Memorial Trophy is headed overseas. Lukas Michel, 25, of Australia, became the first international golfer to win the U.S. Mid-Amateur Championship, rallying twice from 3-down deficits to defeat Joseph Deraney, 36, of Tupelo, Miss., 2 and 1, in the 36-hole final Thursday at Colorado Golf Club.

By winning the 39th playing of this national championship for players 25 years of age and older, Michel earns an exemption into the 2020 U.S. Open Championship at Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, N.Y., scheduled for June 18-21. He's also the second Australian to claim a USGA title in 2019, joining U.S. Women's Amateur champion Gabriela Ruffels, and the 12th overall from his country to win a USGA championship.

"Being the first international to win, I mean, it's a massive thing," said Michel. "Being the first of anything to win something is always great, a great feeling.

"[Saying I'm a USGA champion] sounds unbelievable. It sounds almost too good to be true. Yeah, I guess it will sink in in the coming hours or days. But, yeah, I mean, I'm looking forward to what comes with it in the future for my golf."

An idyllic mid-September day greeted the players with temperatures climbing into the 70s and low humidity. The morning 18 of the final was calm in terms of wind, but the breeze picked up after the lunch break, with gusts in the 15-20 mph range.

As the temperature heated up throughout the day, so did Michel's putter, and it was the flat stick that carried him to the championship. He grabbed his first lead since the second hole on the par-5 33rd, converting a challenging 12-foot birdie putt. One hole later, he lagged a 30-foot eagle putt from the fringe to 18 inches for what turned into a winning birdie when Deraney failed to make his 12-footer.

"Over 36 holes when a guy doesn't miss a putt inside 10 feet, eventually it was tough to beat him, right?" said Deraney. "He might have missed one putt inside 10 feet [on 12 in the morning.] He played great and putted probably the best I've ever seen over the course of, what, 35 holes?"

Deraney, a stay-at-home dad who has captured the last two Canadian Mid-Amateur titles, had a chance to force the match to a 36th hole when he knocked his pitching-wedge tee shot to the downhill, 211-yard, par-3 35th hole to 10 feet. But the putt broke to the right more than he thought.

"I hit a good putt, hit it right where we were looking," said Deraney. "We had it about a cup out and it broke a cup and a half.

"Yeah, I'm proud. I hit a lot of great shots. I didn't lose because I was nervous. I just lost because he beat me."

There was briefly an awkward moment on the green after Deraney missed. He took off his hat and went up to congratulate Michel, not realizing he still had a 3-footer left for par. So, after premature applause from the spectators, the Australian quickly regathered himself and snuck the putt in on the right side.

“It was nerve-wracking, obviously,” said Michel. “But I holed it.”

Then he leaped into the air and enjoyed a bear-hug with his caddie, William Davenport, a 2019 U.S. Mid-Amateur competitor who had been eliminated in the Round of 64 by 2016 champion Stewart Hagestad. Soon afterward, he was lifting the trophy

“I didn’t want to damage the greens,” said Michel of his leap, “but they were so firm I don’t think I could.”

Over the 35 holes, Michel shot the equivalent of 4 under par, with the usual match-play concessions, and Deraney was 3 under. Since the 12th hole of the morning round, the two competitors only tied six holes.

Had it not been for a change in the World Amateur Golf Ranking™ exemption – from anyone in the top 400 to the first 30 age-eligible players in the WAGR – Michel likely would not have made the 20-plus-hour trans-Pacific flight from Melbourne to Denver. Traveling that far for an 18-hole qualifier with limited spots didn’t make much sense, especially since Michel, currently No. 287 in the WAGR, had already been to the U.S. earlier this summer to play in the Sunnehanna Amateur, Northeast Amateur and North & South Amateur. After failing to qualify for the U.S. Amateur in July, he flew home, about a month before qualifying began for the U.S. Mid-Amateur.

“American golf is the best golf in the world, there’s no question about it,” said Michel. “So coming over and playing great golf and beating a really strong field of mostly America’s best mid-amateurs. I mean, that’s everything. And the world’s best mid-amateurs now because of that new exemption criteria.

“Obviously, it makes the field stronger and harder to win and all that, but I’m obviously happy that exemption category was added. I think it makes the event stronger and I think that’s got to be a positive thing.”

In both the morning and afternoon rounds, Deraney built 3-up leads, only to see Michel make comebacks. The turning point in the morning came when Michel claimed three consecutive holes from No. 13 to tie the match, including birdies on the 341-yard, par-4 14th (6 ½-footer after a nice bunker shot) and 592-yard, par-5 15th (conceded after lagging 40-foot eagle putt to 2 feet).

Deraney, who is 217 in the WAGR, then won the par-5 16th with a nice up-and-down birdie (6 feet) from the hill right of the green. Michel followed by making a 25-foot, left-to-right breaking birdie putt on the 211-yard 17th hole. Deraney went into the lunch break by hitting a perfect 56-degree wedge approach to 4 feet, setting up a winning birdie for a 1-up advantage.

Following lunch, Deraney birdied the Nos. 19 and 21 to regain his 3-up lead, and began a stretch of six consecutive untied holes, leaving Deraney 2 up headed to the final nine.

“I tried to explain this yesterday and I kind of struggled,” said Michel. “I don’t know. I can’t explain it. Just all week I’ve been feeling really relaxed. It’s just felt easy, especially on the greens. My putting has been great. So I guess when I got closer to the hole the more confident I got. It just kind of happened.

But I guess it probably has something to do with the [host] family I'm staying with, looking after me really well. Just having a good night's sleep and relaxing and enjoying it with my caddie, Will Davenport, who [did] a great job."

Michel can rest now. A long flight back to Australia awaits, along with plenty of congratulatory text messages and voicemails. But the title is his, along with some major history.

What the Champion Receives

Lukas Michel earned the following for winning the U.S. Mid-Amateur:

- A gold medal
- Custody of the Robert T. Jones Jr. Memorial Trophy for one year
- An exemption into the 2020 U.S. Open Championship at Winged Foot Golf Club
- Exemptions into the next two U.S. Amateur Championships: 2020 at Bandon Dunes Golf Resort and 2021 at Oakmont Country Club
- A 10-year exemption into the U.S. Mid-Amateur: the next three sites are Kinloch Golf Club (2020), Sankaty Head Golf Club (2021) and Erin Hills (2022)
- A likely invitation into the 2020 Masters Tournament

Notable

Runner-up **Joseph Deraney** receives an exemption into the 2020 U.S. Amateur, a three-year exemption into the U.S. Mid-Amateur and an exemption from local qualifying for the 2020 U.S. Open. He also is exempt for the 2020 U.S. Amateur Four-Ball with partner **Garrett Rank**, a full-time NHL referee who lost in the Round of 64 on Monday. Both players are exempt by virtue of being among the top 400 points leaders in the World Amateur Golf Ranking.

Four international players had previously advanced to the championship match without winning the title: **Scott Mayne** (Bermuda, 1988); **Warren Sye** (Canada, 1988); **Wayne Raath** (South Africa, 2000) and **Garrett Rank** (Canada, 2012).

Longtime Florida State Golf Association official and U.S. Mid-Amateur Committee member **Jack Pultorak**, of Tampa, Fla., served as the referee for the morning 18 of the championship match. Denver-area residents **Jim Bunch** and **Bob Austin** were the forward observers. Bunch is a former member of the USGA's Executive Committee, and Austin's wife, Christie, was also an Executive Committee member who served as a Rules official this week. **John Van der Borgh** from the USGA Rules staff, served as the afternoon 18 referee, with **Ed Evans**, of Oklahoma City, Okla., and **Jim Srite**, of Knoxville, Tenn., as the forward observers.

Deraney's caddie, **Sadie LeCheminant**, has now carried a bag in two USGA championship finals. She won with **Rinko Mitsunaga** when she teamed with **Mika Liu** to capture the inaugural U.S. Women's Amateur Four-Ball title at Bandon Dunes, where she was a caddie. LeCheminant currently caddies at Colorado Golf Club and Paradise Valley (Ariz.) Country Club during the winter months.

Lukas Michel first met his caddie, **William Davenport**, of Plant City, Fla., at a tournament in Australia and the two became friends. Once Davenport was eliminated, he agreed to jump on Michel's bag.

Quotable

“Well, I wore a Winged Foot sweater for the first nine holes today. I played there last year. Just a casual round with a member, someone I knew. So, I guess I got an early look at the course there. I mean, that’s unbelievable. I mean, many, many golfers, the best in the world, don’t get the opportunity to play a major, let alone the U.S. Open. Yeah, can’t wait.” – **Lukas Michel** on earning the exemption into the 2020 U.S. Open

“I just had a really good process. You probably watched it. It looked exactly the same time every I stepped up to a putt. The putts had been going in earlier in the week, and just kind of a positive feedback loop when something is going your way. If you keep confident, things keep going your way.” – **Michel** on his torrid putting

“I still work. Like I self-fund all my stuff. My parents aren’t helping me come to all these events. I work at a little golf driving range. I caddie occasionally at the Royal Melbourne Golf Club and I work on my golf. I’m loving it at the moment. I guess this week sort of paid off. In terms of future plans, I guess I’m taking a slower sort of approach. I actually entered the Australian Tour [Qualifying] School last year, got to the final stage, didn’t get a tour card. I knew I was turning 25 at the beginning of the year. I sort of thought about turning pro without any status. Then kind of knew about this event, to be honest. Figured I would give it a run.” – **Michel** when asked what he has done since graduating with a mechanical engineering degree from the University of Melbourne in 2017

“Will is great. We are very similar sort of guys. We think about the game similarly, quite rational, logical. We work through the numbers really well. In a way, when you’re so focused on numbers, any other distraction, whether it’s what’s going on in the background, whether he just hit it to 10 feet or whatever, when you’ve just got one single mind on the yardage and all that, he was really good.” – **Michel** on having caddie **William Davenport** on his bag the last three days of match play

“Unfortunately, one of my toes, the skin is now gone on it. I was walking gingerly because there is a pretty nasty blister on it.” – **Joseph Deraney** on why he appeared to be limping during the latter stages of the match

“It’s tough. Really most of my [mid-amateur] tournaments are 54 holes. The Canadian [Mid-Amateur] is 72 and I was beat after it. I don’t even know how many holes we played. Eleven rounds in seven days is a different kind of deal, along with the grind. So, yeah, I’m exhausted. 4:45 [a.m.] wake-up calls every morning because of 7 a.m. tee times. Yeah, I feel fine right now. Give it 30 minutes and I’ll be snoozing.” – **Deraney** on the long week that included two practice rounds, two stroke-play rounds and six matches, including the 36-hole final

“In perspective, like I said yesterday, this doesn’t change my life either way. I’m still going to go home to my wife and [three young] kids. I wanted to come out and play well and I did, but I got beat.” – **Deraney** putting perspective on his week

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