

Defending Senior Am Champ Wilson Survives Opener Against 2016 Winner Ryan

By David Shefter, USGA

What Happened

Nobody says winning a USGA championship is easy. Trying to do it for a second time can be even harder. Jeff Wilson can fully attest to that. The defending champion, who is vying to be the first consecutive winner of the U.S. Senior Amateur Championship in 39 years, drew 2016 champion Dave Ryan for his Round-of-64 match on Monday at Old Chatham Golf Club.

Wilson, 56, of Fairfield, Calif., the No. 6 seed in the match-play bracket after shooting even-par 144 in stroke play, converted a 4-foot par putt on the 18th green to earn a hard-fought, 1-up victory over Ryan, 65, of Taylorville, Ill.

Neither player led by more than one hole and the lead changed hands five times. When Wilson, the owner and operator of a car dealership in the San Francisco Bay Area, made his winning putt, he looked up to the sky, relieved he had withstood a difficult challenge. Last year, he never went beyond the 17th hole in any of his six matches.

“It was up and down,” said Wilson, one of two players to earn low-amateur honors in the U.S. Open and U.S. Senior Open. “We both made some mistakes. We both missed some putts and we both made them. It was just a tough match.”

Ryan converted an 8-foot par putt on the par-3 17th hole to keep the match tied and after driving his ball way right and laying up 50 yards short of the green, his third shot with a wedge landed 8 feet below the hole. But he misread the par putt, thinking there would not be any break. Wilson came up short and right of the green with his approach from the fairway and played a beautiful bump-and-run chip to 4 feet.

“That’s the luck of the draw,” said Ryan of matching up with the defending champion after squeaking into the bracket with a 7-over score of 151 in stroke play. “He just played better than I did.”

Added Wilson, who plays another champion in Tuesday’s Round of 32, 2011 winner Louis Lee: “We didn’t play our best golf today, but both of us made some putts when we had to. It was hard.”

All three medalists – Michael McCoy, 56, of Norwalk, Iowa, Dean Channell, 59, of Cary, N.C., and Doug Hanzel, 62, of Savannah, Ga. – also survived the opening round of match play on a turbulent day for high seeds. The Nos. 4, 5, 8 and 10 players from stroke play were all bounced from the championship.

That included 2015 champion Chip Lutz, 64, of Reading, Pa., who lost five of the last six holes to Titus Harris, 59, of Houston, Texas, in a 2-down defeat. No. 4 seed Greg Condon, 57, of Monte Vista, Colo., the co-medalist in last year’s championship, lost 18 with a bogey and eventually fell in 19 holes to Mark Knecht, 56, of Paducah, Ky.

“It feels really good,” said Harris, whose last USGA appearance was the 2009 U.S. Mid-Amateur. “It was quite unexpected. The fact that he is a former champion of this event and the fact that I have been an empty nester for three days and came in here on Friday afternoon after dropping my daughter off at [Baylor University] to get here for a practice round. It’s been kind of a whirlwind and I just wanted to try

and play reasonably well. Frankly, this is very, very unexpected. The beginning of the match was as expected but I started to hit a few shots and make a few putts.”

Two-time champion Paul Simson, 68, of Raleigh, N.C., avoided the upset bug while continuing his perfect record in Round-of-64 matches (13-0) with a 2-and-1 win over 2016 runner-up Matt Sughrue, of Arlington, Va. Simson pulled away late with a winning par on No. 15 – Sughrue missed a 4-foot par putt – and a conceded birdie on 16 when he nearly holed out his 54-degree wedge approach from 91 yards. On the par-3 17th, Simson’s 8-iron tee shot stopped 7 feet from the flagstick and two putts from there was good enough to advance.

[My son/caddie] Phillip and I were talking about it on the way in,” said Simson. “What a difficult draw for a first match. At this point, there aren’t too many easy ones. It’s brutal. You absolutely can take nothing for granted when it’s match play, and I don’t. If I lose 17, then you have to play this monster (18th hole) and that’s no easy par by any means.”

McCoy, the 2013 U.S. Mid-Amateur champion, took control of his match against No. 64 seed Walker Taylor, of Wilmington, N.C., with winning pars on Nos. 6 and 7. He went 3 up with a birdie on 13, and then held on for a 1-up victory. Both players bogeyed the par-4 18th hole, which statistically was the toughest in stroke play (4.67).

“I got a little out of rhythm, maybe playing too quick,” said McCoy, whose known Taylor for 20 years as he helped recruit him to his insurance company. “I had a chance to win on 16 and missed an 8-footer and I three-putted 17. I also three-putted 15 and those were my first two three-putts of the tournament. Those were hard putts, side-hillers. Happy to have it [the win]. You are going to have a tough match somewhere along the way.”

Channell collected his first-ever USGA match-play victory with a 2-and-1 decision over Edward Parnell, of Altamonte Springs, Fla. The former collegiate tennis player at Virginia Tech lost his only other USGA match in the 2001 U.S. Mid-Amateur to eventual champion Tim Jackson. One down at the turn, Channell knocked his approach to 3 feet for a conceded birdie and then two-putted from 6 feet on No. 11 to take a 1-up lead. A winning par on 13 and a short birdie on 14 pushed his advantage to 3 up. Despite consecutive bogeys on 15 and 16 – he three-putted the latter – he recovered by hitting his 8-iron tee shot on the 152-yard 17th to within 3 feet for a match-clinching birdie.

“We both did not play very well and both of us had to survive and it ended up being me,” said Channell, who is competing in his second U.S. Senior Amateur. “I fought the pulls all day. Sometimes stuff sneaks into your golf swing that you really have a tough time accounting for. But anyway, I’ve played in match play before and played really well and lost. So I don’t mind playing average and winning.”

Hanzel, the 2013 champion who now owns a 20-6 match-play record in eight Senior Amateur appearances, won three of the first five holes against Keith Smith, of Franklin, Mass., en route to a 4-and-3 victory.

What’s Next

Match play continues on Tuesday morning with the Round of 32 starting at 7:15 a.m. EDT. The Round of 16 will follow in the afternoon, beginning at 1:15 p.m. The quarterfinals and semifinals are scheduled for Wednesday with the 18-hole final on Thursday morning at 7:45 a.m.

Notable

The 9-for-3 playoff on Monday morning for the final match-play spots lasted four holes and nearly two hours. **Edward Parnell**, of Altamonte Springs, Fla., and **Walker Taylor**, of Wilmington, Del., garnered the last two spots with pars on the par-4 13th hole. **Keith Smith**, of Franklin, Mass., gained the first spot with a 3 on the 213-yard 12th hole.

Marvin (Vinny) Giles, 76, of Richmond, Va., saw his bid to qualify for match play end in the 9-for-3 playoff. Giles bogeyed the first hole, the 368-yard, par-4 10th. The two-time USGA champion – he won the 1972 U.S. Amateur and 2009 U.S. Senior Amateur – was bidding to become the oldest player to qualify for match play. This likely was his final USGA championship as his 10-year exemption for winning at Beverly Country Club in Chicago ended this year.

Bob Royak, of Alpharetta, Ga., matched the largest margin of victory in the championship's history with an 8-and-7 win over **Kenneth Coutant**, of Dallas, Texas. It is the 11th time a player has won by that margin.

Six of the nine North Carolinians in the field qualified for match play, but the lone in-state matchup in the Round of 64 went to **Steve Harwell**, of Mooresville, who defeated **Lionel Sutton**, of La Grange, 3 and 2.

Another North Carolinian, former Pinehurst Resort & Country Club superintendent, **Paul Jett**, of Southern Pines, scored one of the day's biggest upsets in eliminating No. 8 seed **Gene Elliott**, of West Des Moines, Iowa, 2 and 1. Jett, the youngest player in the field (he turned 55 on July 7), is competing in his first USGA championship. Elliott, at No. 269 in the World Amateur Golf Ranking™, was the highest-ranked player in the field. "Any win to me is a big win. It looks like a lot of these guys do know each other, but I pretty much don't know anybody. [For me], they are just my next opponent."

Five matches went extra holes in the Round of 64 with **Peter Detemple**, of Canada, the lone international player to qualify for match play, defeating **Edward Armagost**, of Jupiter, Fla., in the longest match of the day (22 holes). Detemple made an 18-footer for par on No. 18 to force extra holes, then made a winning par on the fourth extra hole. The two competitors needed just under 4 hours to play the match, and completed 18 holes in 2 hours, 59 minutes. **Victor Minovich**, of Thornton, Colo., needed 21 holes to oust No. 10 seed **Chris Fieger**, of Denver, Pa.

1986 U.S. Amateur champion **Stewart (Buddy) Alexander**, 66, of Auburn, Ala., is the oldest remaining player. He edged **Wayne Frederick**, of Springfield, Mo., 2 up, and next faces **Jerry Rose**, of Sarasota, Fla.

Alexander is one of six USGA champions remaining. The others are **Jeff Wilson**, **Louis Lee**, **Paul Simson**, **Doug Hanzel** and **Michael McCoy**.

The tee on the par-4 eighth hole was moved up some 90 yards to make the hole drivable at 270 yards. The hole measured 360 and 368 yards during the two rounds of stroke play.

Quotable

"Match play is all about just beating the guys you are playing with. You don't have to play good you just have to play good enough. I think I am playing good. If I am playing pretty good then someone is going to have to play pretty darn good to beat me." – **Doug Hanzel**

“Once you get a couple up on a golf course like this and you make a lot of pars, you are going to win holes and you are not going to lose too many. It’s tough to make birdies out here because you have some long shots in. If you don’t hit it in the fairway you really have a tough time. The golf course is long enough that it’s to my advantage. If I keep driving it well then I will do okay.” -- **Hanzel**

“As I thought before I started, there is eight steps to this [championship]. There’s qualifying, there’s two rounds getting into match play and then there are six matches to win. So I am on step three. I’m just thrilled to death to be able to come back tomorrow.” – **Paul Jett** after eliminating **Gene Elliott**, 2 and 1

“Low. I was more focused on getting my only child [Kate] moved into the dorm at Baylor [University] and all the emotions that go with that. Transportation-wise I was chasing hard just to get here and have a practice round. Her mom and I were really more focused on getting her settled in. We are helicopter parents. She is an only child and all of that. The timing of this is unusual.” – **Titus Harris** on his expectations this week

“This was a tough match. I was looking the way the seeds were going and I said, Oh man, there’s Jack Hall, there’s Jerry Slagle, there’s Matt Soghrue in that group that we would probably get [in the Round of 64]. I said the least [person] that I would like to play would be Matt. Plus, we’re buddies. I don’t like playing people I know because sometimes you have a little compassion and we all know how difficult it is to win. And there is no tomorrow for him now. I want to win as badly as he does, but I’d rather play somebody I don’t know.” – **Paul Simson**

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