

Defending Champion Jeff Wilson Headlines U.S. Senior Amateur Quarterfinalists

By David Shefter, USGA

What Happened

Last year at Eugene (Ore.) Country Club, Jeff Wilson was the last man standing in the U.S. Senior Amateur Championship. This year at Old Chatham Golf Club, he's the last USGA champion remaining. Wilson, 56, of Fairfield, Calif., defeated a past champion (Louis Lee) and a longtime California rival (Craig Steinberg) on Tuesday to reach the quarterfinals of the 65th U.S. Senior Amateur.

In his afternoon Round-of-16 encounter with Steinberg, 61, of Agoura Hills, Wilson, one of two players to earn low-amateur honors in the U.S. Open and U.S. Senior Open, broke open a tight match by winning four consecutive holes to start the inward nine with two birdies (10 and 11) and two pars (12 and 13).

On Tuesday morning, he won the first four holes against 2011 Senior Amateur winner Lee, 63, of Heber Springs, Ark., en route to a 4-and-3 victory.

The par-4 10th was pivotal in both matches, as he knocked wedge approaches inside 5 feet for birdies. Against Steinberg, he delivered a perfect 50-yard shot to within 18 inches on the par-5 11th hole.

"I played a lot better today," said Wilson, who is vying to become the first back-to-back champion in 39 years. "It's never easy, but I felt in a little more in control of my game today, so I was very happy."

Wilson next faces Brady Exber, 63, of Las Vegas, Nev., who bounced 1986 U.S. Amateur champion Stewart (Buddy) Alexander, 66, of Auburn, Ala., 3 and 2. Earlier on Tuesday, Exber eliminated 2013 champion and co-medalist Doug Hanzel, 62, of Savannah, Ga., 1 up.

"For me to beat Doug Hanzel and Buddy Alexander on the same day, are you kidding me? This is a very special day for me, and I mean it with the highest regard," said Exber, who has never advanced this far in 25 previous USGA championships. "I might not sleep tonight."

Three players with North Carolina ties are among the final eight, including former Pinehurst Resort & Country Club superintendent Paul Jett, of Southern Pines, who defeated 2014 Senior Amateur runner-up Bryan Norton, of Mission Hills, Kan., 1 up, in the Round of 16. Earlier on Tuesday, the championship's youngest competitor – he turned 55 on July 7 – won seven consecutive holes, starting from No. 9, in beating Terry Tyson, of Perrysburg, Ohio, 4 and 3.

"Nobody was ever more than 1 up," said Jett about his match against Norton. "Bryan is a solid player and putts it very well. I wish I putted as well as he did. I made three sloppy bogeys on 15, 16 and 17 so that's why we even got to 18. I hit a good hybrid out of the 18th fairway. He was unfortunate that he got under the lip in the [greenside] bunker and didn't have a whole lot of options on what to do with it."

Steve Harwell, 56, of Mooresville, N.C., who has captured the Coleman Invitational Senior at Seminole Golf Club and the North Carolina Senior Amateur in 2019, defeated Kory Frost, 62, of Trabuco Canyon, Calif., 3 and 2, while Charlotte-born Rick Cloninger, 62, of McDonough, Ga., defeated No. 61 seed Mark Knecht, of Paducah, Ky., 5 and 3. Cloninger, a former quarterback at Wofford College, has also lived in Florida and South Carolina.

Earlier on Tuesday, Harwell defeated two-time champion Paul Simson, 68, of Raleigh, N.C., in 20 holes. After missing a 3-foot par putt to win the match on the 18th green, Harwell eventually prevailed with a birdie on the par-3 second hole.

“I am from North Carolina and I have been battling him for 30 years,” said Harwell of Simson, who owns a 34-11 match-play record in the Senior Amateur. “We have had our battles. I have won some, but he has won probably more. I have gotten a little revenge on him this year, so I had a little confidence there. I hit it really good, but he is just a magician. I have seen it and I know I just have to play my game.”

Bob Royak, 55, of Alpharetta, Ga., gave the Peach State two quarterfinalists after knocking out fellow Georgian William Mitchell, 55, of Roswell, Ga., 2 and 1, while Walter Todd, 59, of Laurens, S.C., edged Victor Minovich, 55, of Thornton, Colo., 3 and 1.

Roger Newsom, 55, of Virginia Beach, Va., had one game plan for Old Chatham: hit fairways and greens. It might sound cliché, but that philosophy has served him well through two stroke-play rounds and three matches. In the Round of 16, the ophthalmologist eliminated co-medalist and No. 1 seed Michael McCoy, 56, of Norwalk, Iowa, 4 and 3. Earlier in the day he beat Jerry Slagle, 55, of Southlake, Texas, 2 and 1.

“I’m hitting fairways and greens,” said Newsom, who qualified for his second U.S. Senior Open earlier this year but missed the cut at Notre Dame’s Warren Course. “And after a while somebody is going to make a mistake.”

Newsom had just three bogeys – all against McCoy – in 32 holes on Tuesday and he was the equivalent of 3 under with no bogeys in his Round-of-64 win over David Nelson.

This from a player who only plays weekend golf and hits balls on his lunch break on Wednesdays due to his hectic schedule that not only includes seeing patients but eye surgeries as well. When he was in college at East Carolina, Newsom was paired with future major champion Davis Love III in his first event. Love shot 68 and Newsom a 74. Right there he realized medical school was in his future. In fact, he didn’t play his senior season at ECU to concentrate on his studies.

Since establishing a practice, Newsom has won a pair of Virginia State Opens and a Virginia State Senior Open, while qualifying for two U.S. Mid-Amateurs.

“There are two people in Virginia who I have looked up to,” said Newsom. “[2014 U.S. Senior Amateur champion] Pat Tallent and Keith Decker. And they have kind of mentored me. I’ve said, ‘Look, what do I have to do to get to the top?’ They’ve said you’ve got to hit the ball well, you’ve got to putt well and you’ve got to score. Pat Tallent says you’ve got to go low and don’t call and ask for anything else.”

Somehow, Newsom has managed to excel despite such little reps. “I wouldn’t say I am gifted. I’m just fortunate.”

And now he’s three wins from a title.

What’s Next

The quarterfinal and semifinal matches will be contested on Wednesday, beginning at 7:30 a.m. and 12:45 p.m. EDT, respectively. The 18-hole final is scheduled for Thursday at 7:45 a.m.

Notable

All eight quarterfinalists are exempt from qualifying for the 2020 U.S. Senior Amateur to be played at the Country Club of Detroit, in Grosse Pointe Farms, Mich., from Aug. 29-Sept. 3. The club hosted the 1915 and 1954 U.S. Amateurs, the latter won by Arnold Palmer.

Both players with local ties, two-time champion **Paul Simson**, of Raleigh, N.C., and co-medalist **Dean Channell**, of Cary, N.C., were eliminated in the Round of 32. With 34 match-play victories, Simson, who fell in 20 holes to fellow North Carolinian **Steve Harwell**, of Mooresville, remains four wins shy of the all-time record held by three-time champion **Lew Oehmig**.

Brady Exber, of Las Vegas, Nev., has been a minority owner of the Houston Astros since 2011. Exber says his stake in the franchise "is very small," but he did receive a World Series ring in 2017 and he was proudly wearing a golf shirt with an Astros logo on Tuesday, along with a hat. "I keep looking down on this star with the "H" [on my golf shirt]. If you are flying the flag, don't embarrass these guys. I try to get to all the playoff games with my wife."

Half of the eight quarterfinalists have ties to the Carolinas – North and South. The other four are from California, Georgia, Nevada and Virginia.

One of the day's best rallies occurred in the Round of 32 when 1986 U.S. Amateur champion **Stewart (Buddy) Alexander**, of Auburn, Ala., won six of the last seven holes to defeat **Jerry Rose**, of Sarasota, Fla., 2 and 1. Alexander, the former men's golf coach at the University of Florida, was 4 down after 10. He was eliminated in the afternoon by **Exber**.

One of the 265 volunteers assisting with the championship this week is Ocean Isle, N.C., resident **Mary Lou Tate**, who is working her fourth USGA championship in the Carolinas this year. She volunteered at the U.S. Senior Women's Open at Pine Needles, the U.S. Women's Open at the Country Club of Charleston, the U.S. Amateur at Pinehurst and the U.S. Senior Amateur at Old Chatham. Tate also volunteered at last year's U.S. Open at Shinnecock Hills. "I love it," she said while helping out as a forecaddie on Tuesday.

Quotable

"If you can't keep beating the guys that have won this thing, what's it worth." – **Brady Exber** on having to play a third consecutive USGA champion (Jeff Wilson) in the quarterfinals on Wednesday

"We did the California elimination over here [in the lower half of the bracket]. All the California guys were getting lined up and knocking each other out." – **Jeff Wilson** on five of the seven Californians to make match play being in the bottom portion of the bracket

"I hit balls usually on Wednesdays after I do surgery and then I go back to the office. I hit balls at lunch time. And I play on Friday afternoons. And weekends. I don't play [a lot]. I play at the most, twice a week." – **Roger Newsom**

"I have been striking the ball much better. I went to the claw putting grip last June [2018]. It has been a real tremendous help to me." – **Steve Harwell** on his successful summer

"Considering how low I have been to come out and play some good golf gives me hope that I can keep it going and maybe play well at the [U.S.] Mid-Am in a couple of weeks [in Colorado]. I have had a few

demons and I overcame a lot them this week. I actually played golf the way my eyes see it. This game is such a mental challenge. When you start playing bad you never think you are going to play good and I really didn't think I would play good again. It was refreshing." – co-medalist **Michael McCoy** on his week after falling in the Round of 16

"I just didn't finish. When you finish double-bogey, bogey in matches you are probably not going to come out on top. So very disappointing." – co-medalist and No. 3 seed **Doug Hanzel** on his 1-down defeat to **Brady Exber** in the Round of 32

"Every time I leave one of these [USGA championships] what I take away is that I want to do it again. So hopefully I will get a chance to do it again because you might not ever qualify again. There's a lot of good players around so you have to have good fortune and qualify. It was a tremendous amount of fun. I am glad I got to do it and hopefully I will get to do it again in the future." – co-medalist and No. 2 seed **Dean Channell** on his week at Old Chatham, which is eight miles from his residence

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