

Dominant Performances, Tight Finishes Highlight Thursday at Baltusrol

By Scott Lipsky, USGA

WHAT HAPPENED

Michael Thorbjornsen will head into the quarterfinals with a slight disadvantage, but one that just about any of his fellow competitors would take in a heartbeat. The 16-year-old from Wellesley, Mass., hasn't seen the final two holes of the Upper Course since Round 2 of stroke play, having dispatched each of his three match-play opponents in 16 or fewer holes. His sharp game was on full display Thursday, rolling into the quarterfinals in his USGA championship debut with a pair of impressive victories. The 2016 Drive, Chip & Putt national champion never trailed throughout the day, defeating Nate Stember, 7 and 5, in the Round of 32, before winning four of his first five holes in his Round-of-16 match against Ryan Smith before holding on for a 3-and-2 triumph.

Thorbjornsen, who credited the sharpness of his wedge game with his dominant performance on Thursday morning, didn't have it as easy in the afternoon, but was able to ride the early momentum generated on the first hole, where he erased early troubles with a chip-in for par, while Smith three-putted from 30 feet for bogey. Thorbjornsen was 1 up on the 298-yard 14th hole when he laid up with a 5-iron off the tee and hit a wedge to 8 feet before burying the putt. A Smith bogey on the par-3 15th put Thorbjornsen 3 up before he closed things out on the next hole.

"I kind of got away with it a little bit. I wasn't playing as well as I did this morning, but I still managed to hit some good shots and pretty much just grind through it," he said. "I'm definitely going to stick to the same game plan. On the range tomorrow morning, I'll just make sure that I'm hitting my drive straight, because that's going to be my setup for the whole day tomorrow."

In contrast to Thorbjornsen, Cole Hammer, this year's U.S. Amateur Four-Ball co-champion with fellow U.S. Junior Amateur competitor Garrett Barber, found himself with his back against the wall much of Thursday afternoon. After a 4-and-3 win over Kaiwen Liu, Hammer lost the first two holes of his Round-of-16 match against Trent Phillips and was 3 down through 10 holes before birdies on holes 11 and 14 closed the gap. Phillips was still in the driver's seat, and had putts to win on Nos. 17 and 18 from 12 feet and 6 feet, but missed them both, and then bogeyed the 19th hole to send Hammer to his first Junior Amateur quarterfinal in four tries.

"This is as far as I've ever been, trust me, I knew that coming down the stretch. I was like, man, I really don't want to lose in the Round of 16 three years in a row," said Hammer. "The way we both played coming down the stretch was pretty impressive, and I'm going to remember this for a long time, that's for sure."

Shuai Ming (Ben) Wong, of Hong Kong China, enjoyed the largest margin of victory in the Round of 16, losing the second hole of his match to Jacob Bridgeman before winning eight of his next nine holes and ultimately prevailing, 7 and 6. That was likely a welcome respite from his Round-of-32 match in the morning, which took him 19 holes to dispatch Jolo Timothy Magcalayo, of the Philippines.

In addition to Hammer and Phillips, only one other match reached the 18th hole on Thursday afternoon, with Thomas Ponder winning the last two to defeat Connor Creasy, 1 up, in a contest he never led until the end.

What's Next

Another double-round day on Baltusrol's Upper Course. The first quarterfinal match (Hammer vs. Wong) begins at 7 a.m. EDT, and the semifinals are slated to start at 12:18 p.m. Live coverage on FS1 begins at 2 p.m.

NOTABLE:

- None of the quarterfinalists have advanced this far in the championship previously. Among the group, **Cole Hammer** has made the deepest runs, advancing to the Round of 16 in 2016 and 2017, while **Joe Highsmith** bowed out in the Round of 32 the last two years. The only 2017 quarterfinalist to advance to the Round of 16 was **Ryan Smith**, who lost to **Michael Thorbjornsen**, 3 and 2.
- Friday morning's match between Hammer and **Shuai Ming (Ben) Wong** pits co-champions of the last two U.S. Amateur Four-Ball Championships. Wong won the Four-Ball title in 2017 with Frankie Capan at Pinehurst No. 2.
- **Cameron Sisk** and **Alejandro Madariaga** are the only two players remaining who have not trailed in any of their matches this week.
- Fellow Inman, S.C., residents **Jacob Bridgeman** and **Trent Phillips** would have played one another in the quarterfinals on Friday, but both lost in the Round of 16. Bridgeman lost to Wong, 7 and 6, while Phillips was defeated by Hammer in 19 holes.

QUOTABLE

Cameron Sisk (won, 4 and 3, over Tommy Stephenson)

"It's awesome. I can't wait. I'm on a roll right now. Last year, I was [eliminated] in the Round of 64, so I was eager to come back and play match play and see how I could do. It's exciting. I'm

one year more mature. I think my game is a little better. I think it's just a little bit of everything.”

Akshay Bhatia (won, 2 and 1, over Yuki Moriyama)

“I’m relieved. The first match, I wasn't hitting it great, just kind of struggling in the morning. And then [in the afternoon] me and Yuki both striped it. Whoever made the most birdies would get the win, and I made a lot of putts coming down the stretch and hit a lot of great drives and set myself up for really good birdie opportunities.”

Shuai Ming Wong (won, 7 and 6, over Jacob Bridgeman)

“Right before I went off [in the afternoon] I had kind of a mental picture for putting, a little better feel, a lot of confidence in it. So I went out there and I was aggressive, as I said, early on. With both matches, I was being aggressive, but this one in particular. I was just eyeing the flag.”

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