

## Thorbjornsen Wins U.S. Junior Amateur After Back-and-Forth Match With Close Friend Bhatia

By Scott Lipsky, USGA

### What Happened

As Michael Thorbjornsen's semifinal match against Cameron Sisk wore on and continued into extra holes on Friday, a friendly face in his corner appeared in the gallery. It was Akshay Bhatia, who has known Thorbjornsen for years through the junior golf circuit and had come out to see if his close friend could pull through. He did, and it meant the two would be squaring off in Saturday's 36-hole final on Baltusrol Golf Club's Upper Course.

Fast forward to late Saturday afternoon. Thorbjornsen, who trailed Bhatia for most of their match before pulling ahead for the first and only time on the 32nd hole, struck a 42-foot birdie putt on the 36th hole to inside of 2 feet, and Bhatia, of Wake Forest, N.C., conceded and congratulated his close friend on his 1-up victory in the 71st U.S. Junior Amateur Championship.

"It feels amazing. Personally for myself I feel like this is probably the biggest junior event you can win and I somehow managed to win it," said Thorbjornsen, who, with the victory, earned a spot in the 119th U.S. Open Championship at Pebble Beach. "It just feels amazing because I haven't won a tournament in around just over a year now, so this is the perfect tournament for me to win."

Before his 21-hole affair with Sisk, the 16-year-old from Wellesley, Mass., had, by and large, made easy work of his opponents as he advanced through the match-play bracket, as his first four matches all ended before the 17th hole. It was clear in the early going on Saturday that this wasn't going to be one of those matches. His tee shot on the first hole of the day ended up under the lip of the right fairway bunker, leading to a bogey to start the day and a quick deficit. Another bogey after his approach shot on the par-4 fourth hole put him 2 down, and he three-putted from 10 feet on No. 6 to go 3 down.

Thorbjornsen trailed by 2 down through 18 holes, and after the match resumed at 12:30 p.m., things started to tighten up. On the 21st hole, Bhatia saw a 15-foot par putt lip out to have his lead trimmed to 1 up. After matching Bhatia's birdie putt on No. 22 with one of his own, Thorbjornsen squared things up on the following hole, when he stuck his approach shot from 130 yards to 7 feet and buried the putt. After Bhatia, also 16, briefly retook the lead on the 29th hole, Thorbjornsen took advantage of a big break when his tee shot on the 30th hole, which was headed well left, hit a tree and dropped in the fairway. He proceeded to hit his approach shot to 12 feet and convert the putt to square the match yet again.

It was on the 32nd hole when Thorbjornsen hit perhaps the most memorable shot of his victory, when he drove the green on the 302-yard par-4 32nd hole, leaving himself 24 feet for

eagle. The putt, which broke hard left-to-right, just stayed out, but it was good enough for a conceded birdie and his first lead of the match, which he did not relinquish. Bhatia had a 4-foot putt for birdie on the 35th hole that would have squared the match, but couldn't convert. His 45-foot birdie try from the front fringe on the 36th hole didn't go, opening the door for Thorbjornsen to cozy his putt up to concession range and clinch the title.

### **What's Next**

The 2019 U.S. Junior Amateur will be played at Inverness Club, in Toledo, Ohio, July 15-20. It will be the eighth USGA championship held at Inverness, and the first U.S. Junior Amateur.

### **Notable**

- In addition to his U.S. Open exemption, Thorbjornsen also earns exemptions into the 2019 and 2020 U.S. Amateur. Bhatia earned an exemption into the 2018 U.S. Amateur, and is exempt into U.S. Open sectional qualifying in 2019. They are both exempt into the U.S. Junior Amateur for as long as they are age-eligible.
- Over the course of 36 holes Saturday, Thorbjornsen won nine holes, Bhatia won eight holes, and 19 holes were halved.
- With the usual match-play concessions, both Bhatia and Thorbjornsen recorded 36-hole scores of 2-over 144. Bhatia shot rounds of 72-72, while Thorbjornsen shot 75-69.
- Thorbjornsen is the first Massachusetts resident to win the U.S. Junior Amateur. Brett Quigley, the 1987 champion who served as an on-course analyst for the Junior Amateur this week for Fox Sports, was born in the Bay State, but grew up in neighboring Rhode Island.
- All match play rounds were held on Baltusrol's Upper Course, so Thorbjornsen joins Tony Manero (1936 U.S. Open), Kathy (Baker) Guadagnino (1985 U.S. Women's Open) and Jeff Quinney (2000 U.S. Amateur) as players to win on the Upper.

### **Quotable**

#### **Akshay Bhatia**

"I played great for a lot of holes; he just played a little better. I had a couple of opportunities to square the match and I didn't execute it. But I'm really happy that Michael won. He really deserved it. He played great golf. He stayed very patient and very confident the whole match."

“Everything about this week was pretty memorable. First off, being in the finals and having crowds and cameras all over you, it's something new. I think that was pretty cool to experience.”

### **Michael Thorbjornsen**

On driving the green on the par-4 32nd, which ultimately squared the match:

“I was really feeling confident at that time with a nice little fade. If I hit a regular drive up 14 I'm pretty sure would've gone long, and long on that hole is absolutely dead. Earlier this week when they had the tees up on nine, I was alternating with baby cuts, maybe not full drives, but nice little cuts right into the green. I felt like if I could just do that, but just have a full swing, I could end up pretty close to the pin.”

On who he would like to play a practice round with at the U.S. Open:

“Tiger Woods. That would be something really special. He's been my favorite player ever since I started watching golf or have even known about golf. As well as Brooks Koepka, just because I was supposed to play with him at the Junior Invitational [at Sage Valley], but he already found a foursome. I missed out on that.”

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