

# U.S. Mid-Amateur Championship

Press Conference

Thursday September 27, 2018

## Kevin O'Connell

THE MODERATOR: Okay, we're here with the 2018 U.S. Amateur champion. First of all, like to ask you what your feelings are right now after winning this championship.

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, I mean, the range of emotions throughout the day are certainly interesting. Started off anxious to get out there and get started; obviously a little tired. It's the end of a long week. You're obviously focused on your game, right? I mean, you're kind of one step away from doing what you came here for.

The match was hard fought even though I had a reasonable lead for most of it. The way it ended there, it was nice to be able to two-putt from just ten feet there to get it done. Oftentimes you have to kind of make a putt to win, so it was nice to be able to just two-putt for the win there.

But then afterwards obviously it's just kind of immediate joy, right? It's just an incredible feeling.

**Q. Can you put this in perspective? You're a USGA champion now. You're going to be forever in the USGA's Hall of Champions; your name is always going to be on that trophy; you're going to get a lot of exemptions. Put that into perspective.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, sure. My grandfather and my father introduced me to the game really early on. I probably had a club in my hand by the time I was two years old, so you're talking about a guy that it's just kind of in my blood, as they say. You'd probably have a hard time finding a bigger fan of the game than me.

I certainly understand the importance of the USGA and how great their championships are. And to be the champion, right now that's kind of what I'm probably most proud of and focused on is just simply being a champion, all the stuff that comes along with it. I think that'll hit me probably a little bit later on.

**Q. You're going to get a trip to Pebble Beach.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah.

**Q. You were there this summer for the Amateur. How special is it going to be to go back there for the U.S. Open?**



KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yep.

**Q. I'm sure you've got idols out there on the TOUR, guys you want to play a practice round with. Now you'll be inside the ropes with these guys.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, unfortunately I didn't make match play out there. That was a big disappointment. Obviously I was really preparing for it.

And leaving there, my dad and I both just kind of said to each other, Wouldn't be it great if you could get your game in order and qualify and go back out there, thinking I would go through local and sectional qualifying next year.

So to kind of take care of that early is phenomenal. I can't wait.

**Q. If there were a couple of players you could play a practice round with at Pebble, prior to the U.S. Open, who would you pick?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: I'd love to play with Tiger. You know, I think probably everybody says that. I would like to play with Rickie. You know, Rickie, obviously we don't keep in touch, but we're the same age and we kind of grew up playing a lot of the same events.

Obviously it's been cool to see all the success he's had. I think it would be cool to kind of reconnect with Rickie and go play a practice round.

**Q. You mentioned at the awards ceremony that your parents gave you a second chance at an amateur golf career.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Right.

**Q. Can you talk about trying to become a professional, going through Q-School, being reinstated, that whole process?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, absolutely. So I went to school at UNC and had a pretty good college career. I graduated in 2011. It was my lifelong kind of aspiration to be a professional golfer, and I chased it right away after school.

I only played for not even two full seasons. It just became apparent pretty quickly that I was good, but at that point in time was not as good as I needed to be. That was a difficult kind of realization to come to, but I

did.

I spent probably four, five years kind of working. I was at an investment firm for a while and that was great experience. Then I was a fitter at PXG. That was a great experience. I think actually when I went to work for PXG, it brought me closer again. I wasn't in an office. It was my job to be on a driving range kind of fitting golfers.

I had a chance to practice a lot more, and it really just gave me that bug again to want to play and compete more consistently than I was getting a chance to.

You know, how it kind of started, I just approached my mom and dad. I said, Look, I really want to play as much as I can this year. I've been fortunate to play reasonably well in recent past.

So I had some exemptions into some good tournaments. I could lineup a decent schedule. We were like, You know, if you feel like your game improves and you're in a good position at the end of the year, give Q-School a try.

We decided to go over to Europe, go to the European TOUR Q-School. Regardless of how this turned out, it was my expectation to do that as an amateur, which I'll obviously do.

Anyway, that's kind of how the year played out.

**Q. When is that going to happen?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: I leave Thursday next week.

**Q. Where?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: I start in France.

**Q. First stage?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: First stage, yep.

**Q. What would happen if you somehow got through?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, I don't know. There is certainly some things to figure out; there is no doubt.

I haven't had a chance to really think about whether or not that's still something that I'm going to do. That just was my plan all along.

**Q. Do you have a career idea of what you want to do next?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah.

**Q. Where do you want to go?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, so like I mentioned, the investment firm I worked for, the name was Franklin

Street Partners. They're out of Chapel Hill. They manage money for quite a few guys that played basketball at UNC and were in the NBA both active and retired. So I got pretty close to some of those guys. I've always been a big NBA fan.

So in terms of what I would like to do for a career, I would love to either work in a front office or possibly as an agent. I think I could certainly bring a lot to the table, and also be a lot of fun for me.

**Q. Would you try Web.Com Q-School?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: No, sir.

**Q. It's European Tour or nothing?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Correct.

**Q. Would you have to go back to school and get a degree?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, probably go back and get my law degree for sure. And that's something, undergrad, kind of thinking law school was something I might do in the future.

**Q. Is the game more enjoyable now? You went through the pro thing and now you're reinstated.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Sure.

**Q. Is it more enjoyable now for you?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: No question. You know, I think along with being reinstated I'm also older. I think that helps a lot, too. When you're younger it just kind of means everything to you. Not that winning and playing well doesn't mean a lot anymore, because obviously it does.

Everybody is at these tournaments to compete and win and see how they stack up. But without a doubt, I feel like my perspective is a little bit better. Yeah.

**Q. Scott Harvey is the only other player from North Carolina to win the Mid Amateur. I know you know him.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Uh-huh.

**Q. Have you picked his brain about what he went through to win the Amateur and what it's like playing against these guys?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, I haven't had a chance to play as much with Scott as I would like. Obviously we see each other quite a bit at tournaments. He sent me a really nice text last night. As you guys can imagine, I got text messages from a lot of people; Scott was one of them.

Yeah, he offered some really nice advice, and I thought that was great of him to do that.

**Q. Talk a little bit about the match today. You just seemed to not make a lot of mistakes out there. I know Brett talked about he let some things go especially 10 through 14. Talk about that key stretch and how much that was important for your victory today.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, no question. You know, any time in match play you can get on a roll and get some holes in your pocket and get a lead it's huge.

But that being said, it's funny how little or how small a 4- or 5-up lead feels when you're out there. Just particularly with that big of a crowd cheering for one guy, it doesn't take a lot for a 5-up lead to evaporate pretty quickly.

I felt like probably the key to the match -- so at the turn, certainly the stretch -- so we turned at even through 9, and then, yeah, certainly the start of the second nine where I won -- I can't remember off the top of my head -- but it was three or four holes in a five-hole stretch, and I never really relinquished it. I hit it good enough and the putter was really the key, I think.

**Q. On 11, after you won 10, what did you hit off the tee? You hit it to about ten feet.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yep.

**Q. Then he hit it into the water. You put some pressure on him.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yep. Sure. No, yeah, I can't remember what our number was. I hit 6-iron. It was roughly 195. That was a really nice shot. Got me I think 2-up.

**Q. Then 14 you hit the iron off the tee into the front bunker.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yep.

**Q. What did you hit out of that bunker? Obviously you hit it to seven feet.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, sure. Just a lob wedge. That was a tough bunker shot too because there was a knob about halfway there that I either needed to chunk and run something so it would get back there, or go a little close to the ball and fly it up top and stop it, which is the shot I went with.

I just felt like if I caught it a little too clean all it would do is fly farther and spin more. So anyway, that was a really nice bunker shot and a great putt to kind of keep it rolling there.

**Q. When you left the green do you know you're 5-up?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: You do, yeah. More importantly,

you feel momentum on your side. You start to feel like if I can just hit fairways and just play clean golf you put so much pressure on the other guy. I thought, you know, Charlotte Country Club all week provided a great test.

In a final particularly, it's hard to make birdies. So when you get a lead, you kind of know pars are probably going to get it done.

**Q. When you get to the 18 hole in the morning and you knew how well he had putted the day before and then he made that the 16-footer to win the last hole where it went around the cup.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Sure.

**Q. And now it's down to 3-up; what were you thinking?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, so I lost I guess two out of the last four holes or something like that. Yeah, I was upset. There is no question. There is a huge difference between 5-up and 3-up. It's tough to lose a 5-up lead; 3-up is completely different.

When that putt went down, you know, I didn't play a very good hole, and so I kind of just chalked it up as he deserved to win the hole. I didn't play it very well.

**Q. What was it like? You're out there playing and 99% the crowd is cheering for him and you can hear the, Come on Bretts and all the club members are out here.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yep.

**Q. You've seen Tiger go through this.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yep.

**Q. Mentally does that wear on you at all? You just say, God, it's a little different. It's a less pressure because everybody is rooting for him?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: It was an interesting thing, and I haven't thought a whole lot about it. My comment on the crowd honestly would be that I thought it was cool you had a guy playing this close to home.

There were probably more people out watching maybe than there would've been. That was more my angle on it. I thought it was really fun to play in front of that many people.

**Q. At smaller events it's probably just mom and dad and...**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, so to have this many people was really cool.

**Q. You'll also go to Augusta in the spring. For a guy that grows up in North Carolina, it's not that far**

**to Augusta. Any memories of tournament? What do you remember most?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, so like I said, my dad is a huge golfer. He many introduced me to the game. I think he and I went to Augusta for the first time in '98, if I'm not mistaken, which is the year Mark O'Meara won. He was one of ever my favorite golfers. I was a huge Tiger fan and at the time knew Tiger. At the time I knew Mark and Tiger were pretty close.

I'll never forget. When you walk down on property there and hole No. 1 is there and the scoreboard, and we kind of made our way down to 10 and Tiger and Mark were the first guys we saw. So that was kind of my first memory of Augusta.

It was so cool. Couple of my idols out there on a golf course that you just kind of dream about playing.

**Q. Have you ever played there?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: I have not.

**Q. So when that invitation shows up in your mailbox in late December...**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: You know, it's all-time stuff. You hope you get to do special things in your life, and I would certainly count playing in the Masters as a special thing.

**Q. You got a second life here in your golf life. You're also going to get a second life at the U.S. Amateur and Pinehurst. You played there in '08. What's that going to be like?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, yeah, that's going to be great. Having played the '08 U.S. Amateur, I feel like I'm probably one of few that are probably going to be there in 2019.

So maybe I'll have a leg up on the competition.

**Q. It's a different course now than you played in '08.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, sure, sure.

**Q. Took the rough out. Being from the Raleigh area, you get down there much?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, I mean, I play it quite a bit.

**Q. Play the north and south every year?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Not every year I play the north and south, but I get down there a little bit.

**Q. Probably going to get a lot of invitation in your mail.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Sure.

**Q. Like the Crump and the Coleman. You talk**

**about making your schedule this summer, your schedule is pretty much made for next summer.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, all that kind of stuff is what you play for. And to win this tournament -- and if I'm lucky enough in those invitations come my way, it'll be a lot of fun.

**Q. Just going back to the afternoon on the front side you get to 5 and you hit a gap wedge about 133 yards to about four and a half feet.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, so hole No. 5, we were 133 yards out. Pretty much to any pin that fairway is up ten yards. Pretty steep up there.

My 50-degree wedge is basically just a perfect 140 club. We were 143 adjusted, so basically just get all over a 50-degree and it was perfect.

**Q. Then you win the next hole; you're 5-up again, and then he makes the birdie on 5 and you make a putt again on top of him to halve that hole. Did you think, Hey, I'm in good shape now?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, again, at the same, he's got the crowd out there cheering on every good shot. My focus really starting the afternoon 18 was just to try and hit as many fairways as I possibly can because birdies are going to be tough, and it's going to take nothing for him to get all the momentum here with this crowd.

So back to your point, I didn't necessarily feel in control of the match just because I knew how little it was going to take for him to get some momentum.

But at the same time, with that kind of lead I felt pretty confident I could steer it to the house.

**Q. Yeah. And then just to finish up, in your leadup to this championship, you played in a lot of good competitions. You did well at the Porter Cup, Carolinas Mid, the North Carolina Mid Amateur.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yep.

**Q. Did you feel in good control of your game coming to this championship?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yeah, no question. I learned a lot out at the U.S. Amateur, too. Obviously between practice rounds and stroke play rounds you get a chance to play with a lot of good players. And not only really good players, but guys that are playing well at the time.

Most people are ranked top 50 in the world or they've qualified recently. One of the guys that I got paired with in stroke play was Alex Fitzpatrick, Matthew's younger brother. I learned so much playing with him just kind of how he went about it.

I thought you could tell he grew up the younger brother of a guy that was a successful pro. When I went home and kind of realized I needed to change a few things, I had some time before this started and was fortunate to qualify.

I had to go qualify, but I had enough time to kind of do some things and improve my game. So when I got here, to answer your question, yeah, I felt like my game was in a perfect spot to play well.

**Q. Last question: Next year at Pebble Beach for the U.S. Open.**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: Yep.

**Q. What's the one or two things you learned in the Amateur that are going to help you there?**

KEVIN O'CONNELL: You got to drive the ball in the fairway at Pebble. Those greens are so small that if you're in the rough -- it's worth it to hit less club off the tee and keep it in the fairway.