By David Shefter, USGA

**WHAT HAPPENED**

Kevin O’Connell called his victory this past June at the Monroe Invitational in Pittsford, N.Y., area his biggest triumph of his amateur career.

That was until Thursday’s 4-and-3 triumph at Charlotte Country Club over hometown favorite Brett Boner, 44, in the 36-hole final of the 38th U.S. Mid-Amateur Championship. Now he can call himself a national champion.

Playing in front of a partisan crowd of 300-plus spectators – most of whom were rooting for Carolina Golf Club member Boner – O’Connell, 30, of Cary, N.C., turned back his fellow North Carolinian to earn an exemption into next year’s U.S. Open at Pebble Beach (Calif.) Golf Links. Last month, O’Connell failed to qualify for match play in the U.S. Amateur at Pebble Beach.

“You will be hard-pressed to find a bigger fan of the game than me and I certainly understand the importance of the USGA, and how great their championships are,” said O’Connell. “To be the champion right now is probably what I am most proud of and focused on. Just simply being a champion. All the stuff that comes along with it, I think that will hit me a little big later on.”

A 70-minute suspension for a thunderstorm briefly put O’Connell’s coronation on hold. When the horns blew, he had just extended his margin to 4 up with four to play after Boner missed a 10-footer for par on the 32nd hole. Ten minutes after play resumed, a two-putt par from 10 feet on the par-4 33rd hole secured the title.

“It’s nice to be able to two-putt to get the win,” said O’Connell. “Often times you have to make a putt to win. And then afterward, it’s kind of immediate joy. It’s just an incredible feeling.”

Even during a strong four-year career at the University of North Carolina in which he was named the 2008 Atlantic Coast Conference Freshman of the Year and a third-team All-American, O’Connell never hoisted hardware. After graduation, he made three unsuccessful attempts to qualify for the PGA Tour/Web.com Tour to no avail and eventually applied and regained his amateur status in 2015.

Since then, O’Connell has worked for a wealth management firm in Chapel Hill, N.C., and most recently as a golf equipment representative – he just resigned from that job – while continuing his passion to compete in elite amateur and mid-amateur competitions, including the Monroe, where he posted a one-stroke victory over Bryce Hendrix.

O’Connell came into his second U.S. Mid-Amateur as the No. 364 player in the World Amateur Golf Ranking™ after playing at Pebble Beach. He earned the No. 10 seed for match play after shooting 1-under 141 in stroke play last weekend, then quietly rolled through the bracket until Wednesday. That’s when he needed two remarkable 19-hole comeback victories over Andres Schonbaum and Kyler Sauer to reach the championship match against Boner, a financial advisor who turned back 2016 champion Stewart Hagestad, 1 up, in the semifinals by holing a dramatic 22-foot birdie putt on the 18th green.

Neither competitor matched their semifinal performances, but O’Connell played consistent golf throughout the final. He seized control of the match with five consecutive wins to begin the morning inward nine as Boner doubled Nos. 10 and 11 and then bogeyed the par-5 12th with a three-putt. Boner managed to get back two holes coming in to trail by three at the lunch break.

“It's a very bittersweet ending because I played really poorly today for the most part,” said Boner, who played 10-over-par golf, with the usual match-play concessions. “I made some bad decisions that I didn't realize at the time. Maybe experience has something to do with it.”

A key moment in the afternoon round came at the par-5 25th hole when O’Connell, who owned a 5-up advantage after winning Nos. 23 and 24 with a birdie and bogey, respectively, converted a 14-foot birdie putt moments after Boner had ignited a roar from the gallery by making a 16-footer.

But Boner could get no closer than 3 down, even with spectators urging Boner on with shouts of “C’mon Brett!” Given the circumstances, O’Connell probably thought he was facing Tiger Woods.

Instead, he just beat a Tiger – a 1997 graduate of Auburn University.

“My comment on the crowd honestly would be that I thought it was cool you had a guy playing this close to home,” said O’Connell. “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.”

**WHAT CHAMPION RECEIVES**

**Kevin O’Connell receives the following for winning the 38th U.S. Mid-Amateur Championship:**

* A gold medal
* Custody of the Robert T. Jones Jr. Memorial Trophy for one year
* Exemptions into the next 10 U.S. Mid-Amateur Championships
* Exemption into 2019 U.S. Open at Pebble Beach (Calif.) Golf Links (must be an amateur)
* Exemptions into the next two U.S. Amateur Championships (2019 at Pinehurst Resort & Country Club and 2020 at Bandon Dunes Resort)
* A likely invitation to the 2019 Masters Tournament (must be an amateur)

**NOTABLE**

* Runner-up **Brett Boner** received a silver medal; exemptions into the next three U.S. Mid-Amateur Championships; an exemption into the 2019 U.S. Amateur; and an exemption from local qualifying for the 2019 U.S. Open.
* The 39th U.S. Mid-Amateur Championship will be conducted at Colorado Golf Club, in Parker, and CommonGround Golf Course (stroke-play co-host), in Aurora, from Sept. 14-19.
* This was the third U.S. Mid-Amateur final between players from the same state. In 1985, **Jay Sigel** defeated **O. Gordon Brewer** in a battle of Greater Philadelphia, Pa., residents; and in 2006 **Dave Womack** defeated fellow Georgian **Ryan Hybl.**
* **Kevin O’Connell** becomes the second North Carolinian to win the title, following **Scott Harvey**, of Greensboro, in 2014. **David Eger,** who won in 1988, spent a good portion of his childhood in Charlotte (he was a member at this week’s stroke-play co-host Carolina Golf Club) and attended the University of North Carolina, but was living in Florida and working for the PGA Tour at the time of his triumph at Prairie Dunes. Eger was born in Maryland.
* Eger watched the championship match along with PGA Tour player **Johnson Wagner**, who also resides in Charlotte.
* **O’Connell’s** uncle, **Rich O’Connell**, took a red-eye flight from Los Angeles on Wednesday night to watch the championship match. O’Connell said he had 10 family members in his gallery.

**QUOTABLE**

**Kevin O’Connell on getting a return trip to Pebble Beach after failing to qualify for match play last month in the U.S. Amateur:**

“That was a big disappointment. Obviously, I was really preparing for it. And leaving there, my dad (Charlie) 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 [for the U.S. Open] next year. So to kind of take care of that early is phenomenal. I can't wait.”

**O’Connell when asked if the game is more enjoyable now as a reinstated amateur:**

“No question. 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.”

**O’Connell on his consistent play in the final:**

“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.”

**O’Connell on losing the last two holes of the morning round to go into the lunch break 3 up instead of 5 up:**

“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.”

**Brett Boner on losing five holes in a row, starting at No. 10, in the morning 18:**

“It wasn't so much he went on a run as I went the opposite direction. I made a really bone-headed move on 10, and my brain did not stop moving – it was just moving too fast after I did. I wouldn't forgive myself and move on. On a day like today with that many holes to play, experience should have been that I should have moved on and not worried about it. It's just one hole. I gave him so many holes today where he didn't have any stress. It was all because of my play.

“[Holes] 10 through 14 were just brutal. I was proud that I hung in there. You start thinking all these crazy thoughts. Don't be that guy that loses 10 and 9 or whatever.”

**Boner on his expectations and performance this week in his hometown:**

“I expected to get to match play, and I knew if I could commit and trust myself that I had the game. Very proud of myself for getting here to the final. It is a huge accomplishment. I'm 44 years old. Who knows how many more of these that you'll get…This week was a culmination of all that I've tried to do with golf and I came up just a little short.”

**Boner on the support he received this week:**

“It has been very, very special. I just wish I was holding that trophy.”

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