

Boner, O'Connell Make it an All-Carolina U.S. Mid-Amateur Final

By David Shefter, USGA

WHAT HAPPENED

Brett Boner had played Charlotte Country Club on many occasions before this week's U.S. Mid-Amateur Championship, but never under the pressure that he faced late Wednesday afternoon against 2016 champion Stewart Hagestad.

Holding a precarious 1-up lead in the first of two semifinal matches, Boner, 44, of Charlotte, N.C., watched as Hagestad, 27, of Newport Beach, Calif., stuffed his approach shot on the par-4 18th hole to 5 feet. Boner had 22 feet and a partisan gallery rooting for him from behind the green and clubhouse. Seven years ago at this same locale, he had claimed the first of two Charlotte City Amateur titles, but there was much more at stake this time.

As he stroked the putt and the ball kept creeping toward the hole, Boner began to raise his right arm. The 300 or so spectators could sense the moment. And when the ball dropped, the roar could be heard in downtown Charlotte 4 miles away.

"It was the most thrilling moment of my golf life," said Boner of the 1-up victory. "I hope there is more tomorrow, and I'm planning on it. I'm pinching myself."

Tomorrow is Thursday when Boner, a financial advisor, will face fellow North Carolinian Kevin O'Connell, of Cary, after the 30-year-old golf equipment representative produced his own comeback for the ages. Down four holes after dunking his tee shot in the water on the par-3 11th hole to firefighter Kyler Sauer, 27, of Valencia, Calif., the former University of North Carolina standout rallied to win his second 19-hole match of the day to set up the 36-hole championship match.

Earlier on Wednesday, O'Connell birdied the 18th hole from nearly the same spot Boner did in the semifinals to force extra holes against Andres Schonbaum, 27, of Argentina, then took the match with a par.

Boner and Hagestad, who came into this week No. 20 in the World Amateur Golf Ranking™ and fresh off a run to the Round of 16 in last month's U.S. Amateur, played a tight match with neither player holding more than a 1-up advantage. The match turned when Boner, a 1997 graduate of Auburn University who briefly played as a professional before regaining his amateur status 10 years ago, rolled in consecutive birdie putts of 25 and 28 feet on Nos. 14 and 15 to take a 1-up lead. He nearly went 2 up on 16 but pushed his 6-footer for birdie.

That set the stage for his closing-hole theatrics.

"He hit an incredible shot in there," said Boner of Hagestad's approach shot to 18. "I'm thinking, 'Okay, no reason to be short' and, heck, I almost was. Because if you're short we're going to [the 19th hole] for sure because I know he's not missing that putt."

Added Hagestad: "Yeah, it was fantastic. I mean, I feel like in match play I was able to kind of put some pressure on. But he played great. He kind of became a buzz-saw there on the back nine. I don't know what he shot, [4-under] 31 or something like that."

Things looked bleak for O’Connell after his tee shot on the par-3 11th hole found the pond fronting the green and went 4 down. But he regrouped with a winning birdie on the par-5 12th, then won the 13th with a par when Sauer flew the green with his approach, and No. 14 with a 16-foot birdie putt. Sauer made a remarkable 20-foot par putt to halve the 15th hole, but on the par-16th, O’Connell converted an 8-foot birdie to square the match.

“When he bogeyed 13 and obviously I made par and won that hole to go only 2-down, it felt like a match again. I kind of felt like I had the momentum. So, certainly I would say hole No. 13 [was the turning point].”

They both halved 17 and 18, although Sauer nearly birdied both holes. His 20-footer on 17 just peeled to the left and his 25-footer on 18 missed on the right by inches.

On the 19th hole – the par-4 10th – Sauer’s 185-yard approach from the right sailed over the green, leaving him an impossible up and down. O’Connell’s second from the fairway safely stopped 15 feet below the hole and a two-putt birdie sent him into the final.

WHAT’S NEXT

The 36-hole championship match is scheduled to begin at 7:30 a.m. EDT and continues again following a lunch break at 12:15 p.m. FS1 will broadcast the second 18 of the final from 4-6 p.m. EDT.

The winner receives a 10-year exemption into the U.S. Mid-Amateur, an exemption into the next two U.S. Amateurs and an exemption into the 2019 U.S. Open at Pebble Beach (Calif.) Golf Links. He also receives a likely invitation to the 2019 Masters.

Admission is free.

NOTABLE

- Both finalists are now exempt into the 2019 U.S. Amateur at Pinehurst Resort & Country Club next August.
- Both semifinalists received bronze medals and are exempt into the next two U.S. Mid-Amateur Championships: 2019 at Colorado Golf Club and 2020 at Kinloch Golf Club. The four other quarterfinalists are exempt into next year’s championship.
- **Brett Boner**, of Charlotte, N.C., has a chance to become the fourth player in Mid-Amateur history to win the title in his hometown/area. **Jim Holtgrieve** (St. Louis) won the inaugural championship at Bellerive C.C. in 1981; **William Hoffer** (Elgin, Ill.) won the next year at Knollwood C.C. in Lake Forest, Ill. (Chicago area) and **George Zahringer** (New York) won in 2002 at Stanwich Club, his home club.
- The 19-hole victory by **Kevin O’Connell** over **Andres Schonbaum**, of Argentina, ended the hopes of having the championship’s first international champion. Four foreign-born players have reached the championship match, the last being **Garrett Rank** in 2012 at Conway Farms.
- When **Stewart Hagestad** lost the opening hole in his semifinal match against **Boner**, it was the first time he trailed in 60 holes of match play this week. Hagestad had not played holes 17 and 18 since Saturday’s first round of stroke play.
- **Kyler Sauer** was the only semifinalist to not be ranked in the World Amateur Golf Ranking™. Sauer was bidding to become the second consecutive firefighter to win the title.

- This was the 10th time in U.S. Mid-Amateur history that a semifinal match went extra holes.
- Both finalists are from the same state for the third time in U.S. Amateur history. Jay Sigel and O. Gordon Brewer, of Pennsylvania, met in the 1985 final and Dave Womack and Ryan Hybl, of Georgia, played for the 2006 championship.

QUOTABLE

Brett Boner, of Charlotte, N.C., on the nice crowd that has been following him:

“It's crazy. Very energetic or energizing, I should say. I'm tremendously blessed to be in my hometown playing in this kind of thing and having these people following me. It's fun, a lot of fun. I keep telling myself it's fun. Have fun.”

Boner on learning that he is now exempt into next year's U.S. Amateur Championship at Pinehurst Resort & Country Club:

“Really? Again, I don't play a lot of golf tournaments. I never tried to qualify for the U.S. Amateur or anything anymore. That's incredible. Home state. You know, I'm 44 years old. These things are tough. My feet and toes are hurting right now. That's a great accomplishment. It is. And I don't want to say, Hey, I'm playing with house money now because I don't want rest. So that's great.”

Stewart Hagestad, of Newport Beach, Calif., on playing against a heavy pro-Brett Boner crowd in the semifinals:

“Gosh, he had the crowd on his side and kind of got the ball rolling. When you're feeling it, you're feeling it. When you're hot, you're hot. The hole must have got real big for him.”

Hagestad on the disappointment of losing in the semifinals:

“Yeah, I'm bummed and upset, and like I'll go and reflect on this. But it's going to be a lot easier knowing – and really genuinely knowing – that when the pressure was on and your back was against the wall, you hit good shots.”

Hagestad on seeing a cool father-and-son moment with his quarterfinal opponent, Rusty Mosley:

“He did something really cool. He was on 13, and I said this to both him and his [10-year-old] son [Austin]. We were kind of approaching the green he looked over at his son. At the time he was 2 down. His son kind of smiled at him and [Rusty] smiled back. It was a really cool – as a father, he was just so thrilled that his son was there. A day will come I'm sure when I have a similar type of scenario. It was just ... a very cool moment kind of aside from the competitiveness of the match.”

Kevin O'Connell, of Cary, N.C., on playing a fellow North Carolinian in the championship match:

“Brett is a great player and has been for a long time. We have so many good players in this state. The guy that's on my bag (David Gies III) has played in probably six or seven USGA events. I think there are a lot of good players for sure.”

O'Connell on playing in his first 36-hole final match:

“That'll be interesting. Going to be a long day.”

Kyler Sauer, of Valencia, Calif., on the tough semifinal defeat:

“I'm so happy. I know that was a bad way to end it. I'm going to hear a lot from the guys at work about this for a while, but it was a lot of fun. I definitely surprised myself making it this far. It would've been great to have gone one more day, but I'm looking forward to being able to play the next couple years in this. I'm actually more looking forward to going home and relaxing and not touching a golf club for a while.”

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