

Noah Goodwin and Matthew Wolff Advance to 36-Hole Final at 70th U.S. Junior Amateur Championship

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By Brian DePasquale, USGA

ANDOVER, Kan. – Noah Goodwin, 17, of Corinth, Texas, and Matthew Wolff, 18, of Agoura Hills, Calif., each won quarterfinal and semifinal matches Friday to advance to Saturday's 36-hole final match of the 2017 U.S. Junior Amateur Championship at the par-71, 7,049-yard Flint Hills National Golf Club. The final is scheduled to begin at 6:45 a.m. CDT. Fox Sports 1 (FS1) will provide live coverage.

Goodwin, who reached the U.S. Junior Amateur final last year, losing to Min Woo Lee at The Honors Course, will attempt to become the third player to become champion after being runner-up the previous year. He would join Mason Rudolph, the 1950 champion, and Tim Straub, the 1983 winner.

"I played great golf in the final last year," said Goodwin, who is competing in his fourth Junior Amateur. "I just have to keep playing my own game and just stick to my game plan and just grind."

Goodwin, who is No. 27 in the World Amateur Golf Ranking™, powered his way past Rayhan Thomas, 17, of India, 5 and 4, in the semifinal round. He defeated Davis Shore, 2 up, in his quarterfinal match.

Wolff, who advanced to the Round of 16 in the 2015 Junior Amateur at Colleton River Plantation Club, pulled away from Garrick Higgo, 18, of South Africa, on the inward nine en route to a 3-and-1 decision in the semifinals. Earlier in the day, he posted a 1-up victory over top seed and medalist Austin Eckroat, 18, of Edmond, Okla.

"It's really going to be competitive, probably going to have to make a lot of birdies and minimize my mistakes," said Wolff about his matchup with Goodwin. "It's going to be a hard-fought match."

The U.S. Junior Amateur is one of 13 national championships conducted annually by the United States Golf Association, 10 of which are strictly for amateurs.

Goodwin was in complete control right from the start against Thomas, opening with a 10-footer for birdie on the par-5 first hole. He won with pars on holes 2, 4 and 7 for a commanding 4-up lead before creating some magic with his 58-degree wedge.

He hit the flagstick from 10 yards off the front of the green with his third shot on the par-4 ninth. The ball hung on the edge of the hole inside the allotted 10-second time period and disappeared for a birdie. He then used the same club to hit his tee shot on the 157-yard, par-3 10th to within 3½ feet. Goodwin capped his performance by holing a 42-foot par putt on No. 14 to clinch the victory.

"It [wedge play] definitely has gotten better throughout the week," said Goodwin, who is the first player since Davis Riley in 2013 and 2014 to play in consecutive Junior Amateur finals. "At the very beginning of the week, especially in stroke play, I really struggled with distance control. But I've really tightened that up."

Wolff took advantage of a Rules violation by Higgo with the match all square after 11 holes to move ahead in the semifinals. Higgo accepted a cart ride from a restroom to the 12th tee, which breached the transportation Rule that states no player or caddie can ride in any form of transportation during a stipulated round. The infraction resulted in Wolff taking a 1-up lead.

"As soon as he rolled up on that cart, I kind of knew that something was a little wrong," Wolff said. "I felt like that was a little turning point in the match where out of nowhere I just went 1 up."

Wolff, who is No. 252 in the WAGR, increased his momentum on the par-4 13th when struck his 75-yard approach shot to within 8 feet to set up a birdie putt. He closed out his semifinal win when Higgo found the water with his tee shot on No. 17 and eventually conceded to Wolff, who was on the green in regulation.

With their match all square In the quarterfinals, Eckroat got into trouble when his approach shot landed in the front greenside bunker on the par-5 18th. His bunker shot flew over the green and resulted in a bogey and he conceded Wolff's eagle putt. Wolff had cut a 208-yard 5-iron around a tree to within 24 feet left of the hole.

Eckroat owned a 1-up lead through 12 holes, but Wolff made an 8-foot birdie putt on No. 13 and won the par-4 15th with a par. Eckroat squared the match on the following hole with a short birdie putt.

"We both played unbelievable the whole round," said Eckroat, who made just four bogeys in 96 holes played during the championship. "It was just back and forth, a bunch of birdies. It was a great match."

Goodwin, who has reached match play in the U.S. Amateur the last two years, battled against Shore in the quarterfinals. He twice built a 3-up margin. After Shore climbed to within 1 down, Goodwin made birdie on the par-5 11th before converting a par chip to halve the following hole. He later struck a 5-iron within 20 feet on No. 18 to set up an eagle attempt and was conceded a short birdie putt and the match.

Higgo won six of the opening seven holes en route to a 7-and-6 decision against Aman Gupta, 18, of Charlotte, N.C., in his quarterfinal match. He hit a knock-down driver off the tee on the drivable par-4 sixth and sank a 30-footer for eagle. Higgo extended his lead to 7 up on No. 10 with a 20-foot birdie putt.

Thomas, who was competing in his first USGA championship, holed a 6-foot par putt to win the par-4 12th to square his quarterfinal match against Ryan Smith, 15, of Carlsbad, Calif. He went ahead on No. 14 with a 7-foot par putt and closed out his opponent on the par-3 17th when Smith hit his tee ball into the water hazard.

"[I] just loved being here, being in the atmosphere," said Thomas, who was attempting to become the fifth international U.S. Junior Amateur champion. "It's given me a lot of confidence to know that I can play against the best juniors in the world."

Both finalists are exempt into this year's U.S. Amateur at The Riviera Country Club in Pacific Palisades, Calif., and Bel-Air Country Club, in Los Angeles, Calif., Aug. 14-20, and are exempt into 2018 U.S. Open sectional qualifying.

All quarterfinalists are exempt from qualifying for next year's Junior Amateur at Baltusrol Golf Club in Springfield, N.J., as long as they are under age 19 before the conclusion of the championship.

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