**Code Red in Puerto Rico: 2 Sides Post 65s to Share First-Round Lead**

**What Happened**

For Georgia teenagers LoraLie Cowart and Ava Merrill, Wednesday’s first round of stroke play in the 7th U.S. Women’s Amateur Four-Ball Championship at Grand Reserve Golf Club was a breeze.

Literally and figuratively.

Cowart, 19, of Winston, and Merrill, 17, of Johns Creek, who advanced to the quarterfinals last year at Maridoe Golf Club in Carrollton, Texas, handled the windy conditions with aplomb, carding a bogey-free, 7-under-par 65 to share the lead with 15-year-olds Chloe Kovelesky, of Boca Raton, Fla., and Yana Wilson, of Henderson, Nev.

With breezes in the 20-mile-an-hour range all day, Cowart and Merrill registered five birdies and a chip-in eagle. Kovelesky, a 2021 U.S. Women’s Open qualifier, and Wilson, a two-time Drive, Chip & Putt age-group national champion, registered eight birdies against one bogey. Their 65s matched the fourth-lowest stroke-play round in the championship’s young history (it began in 2015 and wasn’t contested in 2020 due to COVID-19). Faith Choi and Aneka Seumanutafa posted a 60 in 2019 at Timuquana Country Club in Jacksonville, Fla., and there have been two 64s.

This is the first USGA championship to be contested outside of the 50 states and District of Columbia. Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory, and the Puerto Rico Golf Association is one of 58 Allied Golf Associations supported by the USGA.

“When one of us would make a bad shot, the other one definitely had a good one to back it up,” said Cowart, who is completing her freshman year at the University of Georgia, where she has competed in four events, including last week’s Southeastern Conference Championship. “It was just a good partnership out there. We got rolling with the eagle on No. 5. That just got us started..”

The duo followed Cowart’s 40-yard pitch-in on the 492-yard, par-5 fifth with birdies on the par-3 sixth and par-4 ninth to go out in 32. They closed with birdies on 10, 16 and the par-5 18th.

“We ham-and-egged it pretty well,” said Merrill, who is finishing her junior year at Rivers Academy in Alpharetta. “When one of us would struggle, the other would make a birdie. We both contributed well today.”

Although they reside on opposite sides of the country, Wilson, the highest-ranked player in the field at No. 53 in the Women’s World Amateur Golf Ranking® and a 2021 U.S. Girls’ Junior quarterfinalist, and Kovelesky, a past Drive, Chip & Putt national finalist, forged a friendship six years ago at the U.S. Kids Golf World Championship in Pinehurst, N.C. They didn’t become a four-ball side until last year because they were partnering with other players.

“I was happy when she sent me the text,” said Kovelesky.

On Wednesday, they split their eight birdies evenly between the two nines, with the lone blemish coming on the 361-yard, par-4 ninth.

“It was a really good team effort today,” said Wilson. “Chloe really carried me a lot of the way. I had one good hole probably. She’s a really good partner and I’m happy to have her.”

Leigh Chen, 16, of Irvine, Calif., and Anna Huang, 13, of Canada, birdied four consecutive holes on the inward nine to post a 66, one stroke better than Floridians Kendall Griffin, 23, of Sebring, and Elle Nachmann, 18, of Boca Raton. That duo birdied five of the first seven holes before finishing with 11 consecutive pars. Griffin was a semifinalist in 2017 with Kathleen Gallagher.

**What’s Next**

The 64 sides will play Round 2 of stroke play on Thursday after which the field will be trimmed to the low 32 scores for match play, which begins on Friday and concludes with Sunday afternoon’s 18-hole final. If necessary, a playoff will be conducted on Friday morning to determine the final spots in the draw.

**Notable**

* The Puerto Rican side of **Darianys Guzman** and **Camila Negroni** had the honor of hitting the first tee shots of the championship. The duo opened with a 1-over-par 73 and drew a nice gallery of family and friends.
* Defending champions **Savannah Barber** and **Alexa Saldana** opened with a 1-under-par 71 and sit in a tie for 25th place.
* Arkansas State teammates **Olivia Schmidt** and **Elise Schultz** were the last side to arrive in Puerto Rico after competing in the Sun Belt Championship that concluded on Tuesday in Daytona Beach, Fla. Schmidt and Schultz tied for fourth and tied for seventh, respectively, in the individual competition as their team finished third, five strokes behind winner Georgia Southern. They carried their good play into Wednesday’s first round, shooting 2-under 70 without the benefit of a practice round.
* It was a tale of two nines for former Stanford teammates **Shannon Aubert** and **Calli Ringsby.** The duo was 4 over par through eight holes but played their last 10 in 4 under to finish at even-par 72.
* A pair of mid-amateur sides (25 years and older) posted 2-under 70s. Two-time U.S. Women’s Mid-Am champion **Julia Potter-Bobb** (2013, ’16) and 2017 champion **Kelsey Chugg;** and 2015 winner **Lauren Greenlief** and partner **Alexandra Austin.** Greenlief is one of three competitors to play in all seven U.S. Women’s Amateur Four-Balls, and it’s her third start with Austin. The two reached the semifinals in 2016 at Streamsong Resort in Florida.
* Nearly half (31 of 64) of the sides bettered par in Round 1.

**Quotable**

“The golf course is amazing. It’s a great course, and to be playing where they play the Puerto Rico Open is a really fun experience.” – **Chloe Kovelesky** on Grand Reserve Golf Club

“It gives us a lot of confidence, but also some grit and a little bit of fire to do better this year. We’re confident and we know our games and we know how to complement each other’s games well.” – **Ava Merrill** on what reaching last year’s quarterfinals did for her side’s mindset

“Coming into the back [nine] there were some tougher holes. The wind was a little tougher, so we didn’t press too much. We said to ourselves that for a lot of those holes, par’s a good score. We just tried to pace ourselves and be patient.” – **Kendall Griffin** on making 11 consecutive pars with partner **Elle Nachmann** after a 5-under start through seven holes

“We’ve had experience in USGA events. We both individually have been playing really well recently so that gives us a lot of confidence. Not putting any pressure on myself, just having fun out here.” – **Nachmann** on her mindset for the championship

“It was really special. We were a little bit nervous, but it was great.” – **Camila Negroni**, of Puerto Rico, on hitting the first tee shot of the first USGA event conducted in Puerto Rico

“We have an advantage on this course. With this wind I think we were overthinking a little too much at times, but we need to just have fun and go for it.” – **Darianys Guzman**, of Puerto Rico, on competing at a familiar venue

*David Shefter is a senior staff writer for the USGA. Joey Geske, an assistant manager of championship communications at the USGA, contributed. Email them at* *dshefter@usga.org* *or* *jgeske@usga.org**.*