

Red-hot Cunningham eyes 'Michigan Slam'

MICHIGAN AMATEUR

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CHARLEVOIX — Russ Cunningham is the reigning Golf Association of Michigan player of the year and has won every major amateur event in the state, except for one.

Now, he has a shot at winning his first Michigan Amateur championship and creating a "Michigan Slam" of sorts.

Cunningham—who won the 2002 GAM Mid-Amateur Championship, GAM Championship and Michigan Publinx title — won two matches Friday to advance to the Final Four of the Michigan Amateur at Belvedere Golf Club. If he wins today, it will be four majors in a row for the 32-year-old marketing executive from DeWitt.

To accomplish the feat, Cunningham must defeat three younger players: 19-year-old A.J. Balulis of Baldwin, 20-year-old Colby Beckstrom of North Muskegon and 23-year-old Eric Cowles of Perry.

"On paper, I've won events and these other guys are playing for their first major win," Cunningham said. "But in match play situations, you never know."

Beckstrom is scheduled to play Cowles at 8 a.m. in one semifinal, while Cunningham plays Balulis at 8:15 a.m.

The two winners will tee off for the title approximately one hour

after the early matches are completed.

Cunningham advanced by topping defending champion Korey Mahoney of East Lansing with a 19-hole victory in Friday's early match. In 2002, Cunningham lost to Mahoney in the same round. Cunningham advanced to the Final Four by defeating J.J. Modell of Bloomfield Hills, 4 and, 2 in his afternoon match.

Beckstrom — a member of the Texas Christian University golf team — defeated Jason Gordon of East Lansing, 7 and 6, and Mark Kurzynowski of Jackson, 5 and 4.

"I had a good day," Beckstrom said. "The guys I played against today were real good golfers, but I played solidly all day."

Cowles — who defeated Eric Spencer of Bloomfield Hills, 2 and 1, in Friday's early match — advanced with a hard-fought 19-hole victory over Rick Williams of Macomb with a birdie on the playoff hole.

"I putted well in the morning, but I just missed them in the afternoon," Cowles said. "But I made a lot of pars and didn't hurt myself with my bad putting."

Balulis — who ousted top-seeded Andy Ruthkoski — is a student at Ferris State, but does not play golf there. He was 2 down to Mike Wenglikowski before rallying on the back side. He took the lead at No. 16 and got up-and-down on 17 and 18 to hold on for the victory.

"That was probably the most stressed round I've had," Balulis said.