

Michigan Amateur

Short game lifts Beckstrom to Amateur title

By Vartan Kupelian
The Detroit News

CHARLEVOIX, Mich. — A magical short game catapulted Colby Beckstrom, a 20-year-old sophomore at Texas Christian University from North Muskegon, to the championship Saturday in the 92nd Michigan Amateur.

Beckstrom defeated A.J. Balulis of Baldwin, 5 and 3, in the final match at Belvedere Golf Club. Beckstrom did it with an uncanny touch around the greens — the same way he got through his morning semifinal match against Eric Cowles of Perry.

"It was surprising, yes, but that's what I wanted to do and what I came to do," Beckstrom said. "But you don't really expect it. It's exhausting out there, playing as much golf as A.J. and I did."

The finalists played 144 holes in five days but that's the beauty of youth — both were still feeling good and fresh when it was over.

Beckstrom credited older brother, J.J., his caddie, for pulling a big part of the load. J.J. Beckstrom was a contestant in the Amateur. He shot 150 in qualifying but was one of the golfers who failed to get through Tuesday's sudden-death playoff for the

final five spots in the 64-man bracket.

"J.J. made it really easy for me to play golf," Beckstrom said. "He kept my confidence up the entire time, he was so positive."

Beckstrom got it up-and-down for pars on the 17th and 18th holes in a semifinal match against Cowles for a 1-up victory.

"I chipped in four times in five days," said Beckstrom, who plays to a plus-5 handicap and was making his Michigan Amateur debut. "And the one on the 17th, I lipped it out from 25 yards. And it almost went in on 18."

Then, he ended Balulis's

hopes with a chip-in for birdie at the 14th hole.

Balulis, 19, eliminated Dewitt's Russ Cunningham, the Golf Association of Michigan champion and 2002 Player of the Year, 2-up.

The championship match was almost anti-climatic after the semifinals both went to the 18th. It seemed even more so when Beckstrom won the first three holes against Balulis — the first and third with birdies — to take an early lead.

Beckstrom made birdie at the first hole in four of his six matches.

"It's huge in match play to win the first hole," he said.

But Balulis won the par-5 fifth hole with a birdie and the sixth with a par to narrow the deficit. Beckstrom made a 35-foot birdie putt at the seventh hole but Balulis, from 15 feet, topped him in one of the more riveting exchanges.

The match turned decidedly in Beckstrom's favor on the eighth hole, where he made par. Balulis was bunkered off the tee on the par 3 and could make no better than four when he conceded Beckstrom's tap-in for par.

Beckstrom backed up his momentum with another unlikely putt at the ninth hole for birdie,

this time from 30 feet, to go 3-up once again.

"I struggled with my putter a little bit," he said. "I missed a few putts that should've gone but I made a couple of long putts that made up for it."

It remained that way until the short par-3 14th. Balulis hit the green but Beckstrom left his tee shot short, about 10 feet off the front edge of the green, and then chipped in to go 4-up and dormie.

"That just took the air out of my sails when he chipped it in," Balulis said. "That was awesome."

The match ended on the next hole when Balulis, after driving

wildly, conceded the hole and the match.

"I had nothing — not even an unplayable," he said.

"Just the way he started out, he got me down quick. He's tough."

Balulis is a sophomore at Ferris State but he's not on the golf team — yet.

"Hopefully this year, now after this," said the long-hitting Balulis, who shot 68 in his semifinal victory and was 1 over through 14 holes against Beckstrom.

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