

# Runner-up proves mettle

BY STEPHEN BELL

NEWS-REVIEW SPORTS WRITER

CHARLEVOIX — Though the match, the Michigan Amateur Championship, was lost to Colby Beckstrom, a cult hero may have been born with the gutty, everyman runner-up performance of A.J. Balulis.

Balulis, a 19-year-old from Baldwin, knocked off two big guns in match play at the Belvedere Golf Club before succumbing to the natural swing and big-shot ability of Beckstrom. But he didn't go down without a fight.

Among a sea of bags rocking school colors — MSU green, U-M blue and, in the end, the purple of TCU — Balulis' anonymous gear stood out; an independent Fugazi to so many U2s. Or Onyx — All we got is us. Balulis just finished his first year at Ferris State, after transferring from Mississippi State, but wasn't on the golf team.

"I don't play for anybody," Balulis said. "I play for myself."

Somehow, Balulis foresaw his fate against Beckstrom: No. 15 in headlamp white, a clear premonition.

"I was angry that they moved the tees up on hole 15," he said after beating Mike Ignasiak in the third round of match play on Friday. "There was no yardage to the gap and I bogeyed that hole."

It was on that 15th hole that Balulis conceded the championship to Beckstrom. But it was on 14 that Beckstrom really won it. It's a direct par 3 with a sylvan threat looming over

the fairway, and for the first time in the match, Balulis hit the green. Beckstrom's tee shot fell just short, but he chipped in for a birdie and no worse than a three-stroke lead.

"It just took the air out of my sails when he chipped in on 14," Balulis said. "That was awesome."

But old news to Beckstrom.

"I chipped in four times in five days," he said.

Balulis missed his putt, the second straight that went in and out.

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A.J. Balulis

Michigan Amateur Championship runner-up

"I was trying to come back," Balulis said. "I thought I was going to make it go 18 holes, but then I missed those two putts on 13 and 14. That was huge."

Exasperated, Balulis teed off from 15 straight down the middle ... into the woods. Walking towards the ball, and the end, he reminisced to his dad, and caddy, of his one-time fondness for the course. That, like his ball, was long gone.

"I conceded the hole," he said. "I had nothing. Not even an unplayable lie."

That earned Balulis just the runner-up trophy. But oh what a run up.

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**Michigan Amateur runner-up A.J. Balulis hits out of a sand trap on the eighth hole of the Belvedere Golf Club.**

## SECOND PLACE: Balulis concedes

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Saturday began with Balulis earning points towards rock-and-roll status by literally running up to make his 8:15 a.m. semifinal tee time.

"My alarm clock was an hour slow," he explained. "I thought it was only 6:52, but it was actually 7:52. I usually get here an hour early, so my routine was off a little."

His internal clock kicked in at the right time, as Balulis broke the match open against reigning GAM Player of the Year Russ Cunningham to win holes 16, 17 and 18 for a 2-up victory.

"I knew going in that if I lose, it's because I beat myself," Cun-

ningham said.

Balulis won his quarterfinal match with Andy Ruthkoski, the record-setting tournament medalist, with a birdie on 18. Yet, like Cunningham, Ruthkoski was stingy with the love.

"We both played sloppy," Ruthkoski said. "Anything can happen in match play. I guess he made a lot more lucky putts than I expected him to make, and I missed a lot more putts."

Sometimes, they say, it's better to be lucky than good. But as A.J. Balulis can attest, it's better still to be lucky and good.

Stephen Bell can be reached at 439-9341 or at [sbell@petoskeynews.com](mailto:sbell@petoskeynews.com).