



GOOD ENOUGH

Lamenting a lack of time to adequately prepare for tournament golf, Mike Small nevertheless managed to win another Professional National Championship

By Rich Skyzinski

If Mike Small is this good *without* preparation, imagine how much he might win when he has his game in tip-top shape.

As the calendar turned from June to July, the 43-year-old Small won the PGA Professional National Championship at Twin Warriors Golf Club in Santa Ana Pueblo, N.M. That, in and of itself, wouldn't be much of a surprise since Small now has been no worse than fourth in five of his six starts at the PNC.

PNC HISTORY

Here's a year-by-year record of Mike Small's performance at the Professional National Championship:

YEAR	SCORES	PAR	PLACE	EARNINGS
2004	66-72-70-69—277	-11	2	\$39,000
2005	73-76-71-69—278	-10	1	67,000
2006	69-68-70-74—281	-7	4	27,500
2007	70-67-75-73—285	-3	T2	41,000
2008	72-74-74-70—290	+2	T41	2,915
2009	70-71-68-68—277	-7	1	75,000

But Small traveled to the Southwest with virtually no preparation. As head coach of the men's golf team at the University of Illinois, Small's college season ended only three weeks earlier as the Illini won their first Big Ten title in more than 20 years—since Small and Steve Stricker played on the team—and qualified to play in the NCAA Championship.

"I think I've actually played in three one-day tournaments this year, before I came here," he explained. "I haven't played a multi-day tournament since November. But I'm around the game. I'm around players, better players, so I'm in the game."

"But I didn't have great aspirations this week. I wasn't seasoned; I wasn't ready to go. Your guess as to how I would play was as good as mine. I just stayed positive and played better every day. I made some mistakes, but each day I eliminated a few of those."

It might seem reasonable to assume that, in his position, Small has all the practice time he needs and playing with younger players is beneficial. But that's not the case.

"I don't play with my team very much," Small said. "It's just not good for my game to play with them; I'm worried about their games too much. I played with them maybe half a dozen times this semester. But I'm around them, and when you're around college kids it keeps you young."

"I honestly think they're going to look at this and say, 'How on earth did Coach win because he's been hitting it so bad for about a year?' They'd been making fun of me, really, but I made some adjustments last week and hit it

good. But it is what it is. It's kind of shocking to be standing here (with the trophy), but I'll take it."

Five different players had at least a share of the lead in the final round. Two of them came to the 72nd hole with a chance to get into a playoff after Small, playing in the next-to-last group, posted a final-round 68 and a 7-under-par total of 277.

But Mark Sheftic, a teaching professional at famed Merion Golf Club in Ardmore, Pa., hit his approach over the green and chipped just short, leaving himself with a 7-foot par putt that he missed. Then Steve Schneider, a 45-year-old assistant professional from Sandy, Utah, narrowly missed on a 35-foot birdie putt try. Schneider, ironically, also was runner-up when the Professional National Championship was played at

Twin Warriors in 2003.

"I just kind of hung on at the end," said Small. "On this golf course, at this altitude and in this heat, guys kind of come backward and I kind of outlasted them, I think."

"Yeah, I'm surprised," continued Small. "I thought I'd have to shoot 65 or 66 today to win. You never know. I just stayed around. I talked to a sports psychologist that works with the team and he said, 'Hang around, hang around. You don't have to go

get it every time.' Sometimes funny things happen."

Before the PGA Championship, to be played later this month at Hazeltine National Golf Club in Chaska, Minn., Small said he would turn his attention to the Illinois PGA and the Illinois Open, events he has dominated in recent years. Small, who won the Big Ten coach of the year honor this year for the second time, has won seven Illinois PGAs, including every one since 2003, and four Illinois Opens.

And, undoubtedly, he'll be plenty tough since now he'll have some time to practice. 🏌️



Small has hoisted the PNC trophy twice since 2005.

WHAT HE GETS

For his victory at the PGA Professional National Championship, Mike Small receives:

- First-place purse of \$75,000.
- An exemption from qualifying for the 2009 PGA Championship.
- An exemption from qualifying for the next 10 Professional National Championships.
- A spot on the 2009 U.S. PGA Cup team. (The PGA Cup is an international competition featuring a team of club and teaching professionals from the U.S. against a team from Great Britain and Ireland.)
- Entry into six PGA Tour events.