



Brad Benjamin never trailed in the 36-hole final.

At the U.S. Amateur Public Links in Oklahoma, Brad Benjamin pulled off a huge upset that effected a temporary change in his career plans

By Ron Balicki

It's not that Brad Benjamin doubted his ability. It was more of a matter of being realistic.

The 22-year old from Rockford, Ill., knew just how difficult it is, no matter how good a player one might be, to win a USGA championship. First there is making the 64-player match-play field through 36 holes of on-site, stroke-play qualifying. Then one has to win six

matches in order to hoist the champion's trophy.

So at this year's U.S. Amateur Public Links Championship at the Jimmie Austin OU Golf Club in Norman, Okla., in mid-July, Benjamin was leaving his options open. That's why he signed up to compete in the 36-hole Aldeen Cup at his home course, Aldeen Golf Club. He booked his outgoing flight from Oklahoma for that Friday, July 17, which was the day *before* the scheduled 36-hole

championship match.

"I didn't doubt myself," Benjamin said concerning his decision to schedule the potential early return trip. "It was just that I had a tournament at home and if I was playing (in the APL), the worst case scenario, I'd pay the fee for the plane cancellation or whatever."

He did just that and it was the best money the recent University of Memphis graduate has ever spent.

Not only did Benjamin advance to that Friday's quarterfinal and semifinal rounds, he went on the next day to upset heavily favored Nick Taylor of Canada in the final, doing so in a most convincing manner with a 7-and-6 victory.

No doubt those at Aldeen Golf

Club will cut him some slack for missing his home tournament. After all, the club now boasts a national amateur champion.

“It’s all still just sinking in,” Benjamin said shortly after hitting an 8-iron shot to within two inches on the 30th hole—the par-3 12th—for a conceded birdie that clinched the match. “When it does, I know it’s going to mean a lot to be a national champion.

“I think I know what I’m capable of and I think I showed it this week and especially today,” continued Benjamin. “I’ll take winning every day of the week and I don’t need a trophy to know how good a player I am.”

Benjamin, who swings left-handed and putts right-handed, had all intentions of turning professional this fall. But like those plane reservations, his plans have been amended, and the first change is a return trip to Oklahoma in late August for the U.S. Amateur at Southern Hills Country Club in Tulsa; the APL champ receives an exemption from qualifying.

Not only does the APL victory earn Benjamin the championship’s gold medal and custody of the James D. Standish Jr. Cup for the ensuing year, but it also punches his ticket to

Augusta National Golf Club next April. Traditionally, the list of amateurs invited to compete in The Masters by Augusta National includes

athlete of the year in men’s golf. “I attended the Monday practice round (at The Masters) in 2006. Right now it’s hard to imagine I’ll be playing there next year. It’s just all so surreal.”

Going into the championship match, Taylor and Benjamin were like night and day as far as their golfing résumés were concerned, even to the point of what had transpired the previous few days.

Taylor was Canada’s amateur player of the year. Last season at the University of Washington, he was a first-team All-American after winning four tournaments, placing second at the Pac-10 Championship and NCAA West Regional and tying for ninth at the NCAA Championship. He tied for second last fall at the World Amateur Team Championship, earlier in the summer had qualified for the U.S. Open, where he tied for 36th and was low amateur, and also captured the Sahalee Players Championship.

At the APL, he lived up to all those credentials.

He was qualifying medalist by four shots with a 6-under-par 136, and in his first five matches, he won before the 15th hole three times and never was extended as far as the 18th hole.



Benjamin keeps the James D. Standish Trophy for a year, and another reward for his victory he’ll enjoy in the spring: a spot in the 2010 Masters.

the current Amateur Public Links champion (provided the player still is an amateur).

“Not a chance I’ll be turning pro (in fall),” said Benjamin, a two-time (2008 and 2009) Conference-USA scholar

BENJAMIN’S ROUTE THROUGH THE AMATEUR PUBLIC LINKS

ROUND	OPPONENT	SCORE	COMMENT
1	Ben Freeman, Fargo, N.D.	3 and 1	Never trailed after a birdie at the short (328 yards) par-4 third.
2	Jessie Massie, Louisville, Ky.	19 holes	Last-minute rally: Benjamin wins 18th and 19th holes with pars.
3	Dan Sullivan, Pasadena, Calif.	2 and 1	All square after 13, Benjamin goes ahead for good with birdies at 14 and 15.
Qtrs.	Sang Yi, Carrollton, Texas	5 and 3	A bit of a breather as Benjamin doesn’t lose a single hole.
Semis	Brandon Crick, McCook, Neb.	1 up	Benjamin makes key 5-foot putts to win 17 with a par and 18 with a birdie.
Final	Nick Taylor, Canada	7 and 6	Loses only two of first 27 holes against the low amateur at this year’s U.S. Open.

Encore!

In a nailbiter at the Illinois Open, Brad Benjamin penned another highlight to his great summer

BRAD BENJAMIN'S victory in the U.S. Amateur Public Links Championship might have been a surprise, since the Rockford, Ill., golfer had no big wins prior to it. But that victory was certainly no fluke. Benjamin proved that by winning the 60th Illinois Open in the immediate aftermath of his national title.

In becoming the second consecutive amateur to win his state tournament, Benjamin beat University of Illinois men's coach Mike Small, who was bidding for a record-tying fifth win in the event.

Benjamin, 22, birdied the 17th and 18th holes of regulation play to finish tied with Small at 5-under-par 208 for 54 holes at Hawthorn Woods Country Club. That set up a three-hole playoff between this year's APL champion and the winner of the PGA Professional National Championship. Benjamin won it with three pars and some good fortune.

Small put his 8-iron approach to the final hole into a flower bed behind the green. His ball was lodged against a rock, but Small made a spectacular recovery. He turned a wedge around and hit backward, caroming the ball off the rock to within 10 feet of the cup. After Benjamin two-putted for par from 30 feet, he waited to see if Small could save par and

NICK NOVELLI/ILLINOIS PGA



send the playoff to sudden death. He couldn't.

"He's such a great player, I thought he'd pull something off to stay in it," said Benjamin. "Then I figured he'd make that putt, but I dodged a bullet."

For Small, he now finished first or second in each of the last seven Illinois Opens.

Benjamin's Illinois Open win had a different feeling than the U.S. Amateur Public Links.

"The Public Links was above what I dreamed of," he said. "This (tournament) I felt I had a chance to win if I played as well. My putting saved me. I rolled it as good as I have in awhile."

Benjamin, whose collegiate career at the University of Memphis ended in the spring, gave the Illinois Open back-to-back amateur champions for the third time, the last coming in 1999 and 2000 when Adam Turner and

Curtis Malm won. This time, Benjamin's win followed that of Illinois State's Joe Emerich, who finished in a tie for 21st trying to repeat.

When Benjamin was coming out of high school, Small briefly tried to recruit him to Illinois.

"It was nothing against him or his school," said Benjamin. "I just wanted to play somewhere where I could play almost 12 months a year."

Benjamin, playing in the threesome in front of Small in the final round, benefitted by having some hot players, professionals Guy Sciortino and Matt Miller, in his group.

"That helped me down the stretch," said Benjamin. "My mindset wasn't on the group behind us."

Sciortino made bogey at the 18th. Otherwise it would have been a three-man playoff for the title.

—Len Ziehm

On the other hand, Benjamin won his first and only college tournament at the 2007 Palisades Classic and his top amateur credentials included a win at the Illinois Tournament of Champions, being a co-medalist at the 2008 CDGA Amateur and a securing a victory at the Ledges Invitational in Illinois.

Throughout the week in Oklahoma, where the first four days consisted of triple-digit temperatures before "cooling" off into the low 90s the final two days, Benjamin was hardly noticed.

He finished sixth in stroke play qualifying, six shots behind Taylor. He went to at least the 17th hole in all but one of his first five matches with one going 19 holes. In another, the semifinals, he had to win the last two holes for a 1-up victory.

While most felt Taylor would make the final a runaway, Benjamin never doubted what he was capable of doing.

"On paper, if you looked at what both of us have done, you'd say he's twice the player that I am," Benjamin said. "I've spent countless hours working to improve. I knew it would come and eventually I'd see the results of that work."

What he had accomplished made Benjamin pause for a long time, and then he buried his head in his hands and his eyes welled.

"You put so much effort into it. I know I'm capable. It's just being patient, waiting for your time."

And after a week in the scorching Oklahoma sun, when perhaps not even he expected it, Benjamin's time had finally come. 🏌️

Ron Balicki covers amateur and college golf for Golfweek.