



ILLINOIS

State Amateur



After going low in the last round, Guthrie's charge left him one stroke better than his nearest challengers.

DODGEBALL



Safely in the clubhouse with a share of the lead, Luke Guthrie survived challenges from his last two contenders and emerged as Illinois State Amateur champion

By Greg Stewart

As most of the gallery followed the hometown favorite and other fans were on the heels of the tournament leader, Luke Guthrie carved his way around Bloomington Country Club almost unnoticed during the final round of the 79th Illinois State Amateur Championship. That is, until his final score was posted.

Guthrie, a 19-year-old sophomore at the University of Illinois, carded a 5-under-par 65 in the final round, and not only did that represent a share of the week's low score, but, more importantly, it stole the championship from Rockford's Brad Benjamin and Bloomington's Todd Mitchell.

Tied for the lead when he posted his 72-hole total of 4-under 276, Guthrie *never* led until Benjamin made bogey at his final hole. Benjamin and Mitchell, who played his last five holes in 4 under, finished tied for second at 277.

"I was just trying to catch (Benjamin) and I kept making birdies," Guthrie said of seven red numbers in his final round. "I didn't realize at the time I was shooting that low of a number. Looking back, it was pretty awesome."

With Guthrie going low, Mitchell giving his hometown followers something to cheer about and Benjamin grinding, the championship turned into a three-player race with nine holes to go.

Benjamin, one of the pre-event favorites with a national and state triumph in July (see stories on pages 16 and 18), took a two-shot lead earlier in the day with a third-round 68.

Mitchell, a two-time State Amateur champion (2002-03) trying to gain a third in front of the home crowd, shot out of the gate with a first-round 65, but struggled with a pair of 72s in the middle rounds.

And then there was Guthrie, who started the tournament 5 over after just nine holes and briefly considered the reality that he could be headed home to Quincy.

"I don't know why I was struggling, but my focus was very broad," said Guthrie, who came to the State Amateur from the Western Amateur at Conway Farms in Lake Forest, where

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Bloomington C.C. | Aug. 11-13 | Par 70 | 6,530 yards

POS.	PLAYER	HOMETOWN	1	2	3	4	TOTAL
1	LUKE GUTHRIE	Quincy	73	68	70	65	276
2	BRAD BENJAMIN	Rockford	68	70	68	71	277
	TODD MITCHELL	Bloomington	65	72	72	68	277
4	MAX SCODRO	Chicago	72	70	69	69	280
5	BRAD HOPFINGER	Lake Forest	74	67	72	68	281
6	CARLOS SAINZ	Elgin	72	70	70	70	282
	JOHN EHRGOTT	Peoria	70	69	71	72	282
8	ZACH BARLOW	Percy	70	72	69	72	283
9	BENNETT BLAKEMAN	Burr Ridge	72	73	73	66	284
	JOE EMERICH	Palatine	68	73	70	73	284
	TIM SHEPPARD	East Peoria	71	71	73	69	284
12	JOE KINNEY	Antioch	66	72	73	74	285
13	TIM HOSS	Champaign	72	69	74	73	288
14	MARK ESPOSITO	Naperville	71	71	73	74	289
15	SEAN DOZIER	Hudson	79	67	73	72	291
	TOMMY BLIEFNICK	Decatur	76	70	72	73	291
	DAN STRINGFELLOW	Roselle	72	71	76	72	291
18	PAUL DAGYS	Oak Forest	71	72	71	78	292
19	DAVE RYAN	Taylorville	70	74	73	76	293
20	GRANT GOLTZ	Saint Charles	72	72	76	74	294
21	DAVID LAWRENCE	Moline	73	70	74	78	295
22	MASON JACOBS	Metropolis	72	75	80	69	296
23	ANDREW WYATT	Lake Forest	72	74	77	74	297
24	THOMAS GREENE	Roselle	70	74	76	78	298
	JOHN WRIGHT	Aurora	70	77	77	74	298
	TOM MILER	Kewanee	73	74	76	75	298
27	DEREK MEINHART	Mattoon	74	73	74	78	299
28	LEE KOLQUIST	Geneva	72	73	80	75	300
29	SCOTT PRALLE	LaGrange	74	73	76	79	302
	CHARLES TRAVIS	Hinsdale	69	78	78	77	302

Note: Top 15 finishers and ties earn exemptions from qualifying for the 2010 Illinois State Amateur.

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he finished tied for 38th in the stroke play portion of the event.

“The back nine (33) was big because I was in danger of missing the cut,” he said. “But I knew it was a long tournament with a lot of golf left. I just tried to stay patient and not panic too much. I had to suck it up and keep grinding.”

Guthrie played his next 63 holes in 9 under, highlighted by the birdie binge in the afternoon of the 36-hole final day. His only blemish was a double-bogey 7 at the par-5 sixth, which he credited for honing his focus.

“I was lost with my swing the whole time until that double,” Guthrie said of his poor drive that was hooked into the

RECAP

ROUND 1

Despite hitting just four greens over his first nine, Todd Mitchell made three birdies and got up and down for par four times. Joe Kinney had a hot putter on BCC's back nine with three birdies in a four-hole stretch starting at the 11th, then adding a 20-foot birdie at No. 17.

Mitchell	... -5
Kinney	... -4
Benjamin	... -2
Emerich	... -2
Travis	... -1
T32 Guthrie	... +3

ROUND 2

Brad Benjamin gets to within one with a card that includes two birdies, two bogeys, a double at the par-3 eighth and an eagle at the par-4 second. Brad Hopfinger shares the day's best score, 67, with an eagle and two birdies in his first five holes, then closing with 13 straight pars.

Mitchell	... -3
Kinney	... -2
Benjamin	... -2
Ehrgott	... -1
Hopfinger	... +1
Emerich	... +1
Guthrie	... +1
Hoss	... +1

ROUND 3

After going 1 over par on his first nine, Benjamin took control with a birdie at 12, an eagle at the 14th and another birdie at 16. Zach Barlow climbed into a tie for fourth with a steady 1-under-par 69 that featured two birdies and 15 pars after an opening bogey.

Benjamin	... -4
Mitchell	... -1
Ehrgott	... E
Barlow	... +1
Emerich	... +1
Guthrie	... +1
Kinney	... +1



With another second-place finish, Mitchell has now two runner-up efforts in the State Amateur to go with a pair of victories.

trees. “But after that, I don’t think I missed a fairway.”

He also hit 15 of 18 greens in regulation and, with the putter working, played the final 18 holes in 5 under to make up a five-shot deficit.

“I really haven’t had a very successful summer,” reasoned Guthrie, who will have played in three national events at the conclusion of the U.S. Amateur Championship in late August. “I put myself in position close to the lead, and to finish like I did is very gratifying. This is really my first big win.”

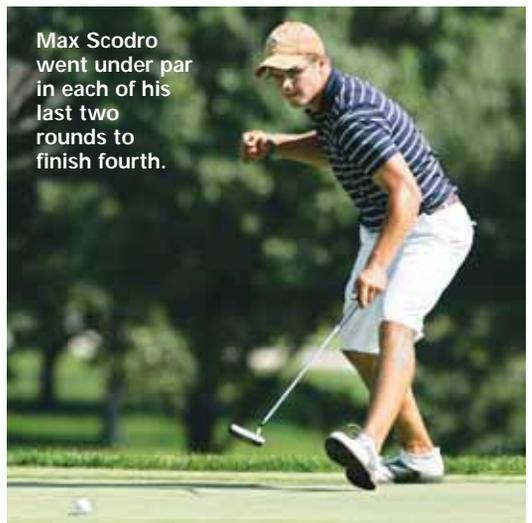
But before he could savor the victory, Guthrie had to endure the finishes of Benjamin and Mitchell, either of which could have forced a playoff.

Guthrie was in the clubhouse at 4 under with Benjamin on the 18th tee, needing a par to remain tied and force a playoff. The left-hander fanned a 4-iron on the 348-yard closing hole, a mistake magnified by an unfortunate bounce that went straight left and settled behind a tree. Benjamin was forced to play a low punch

shot to the green, and though the ball ended up hole high, it missed on the short side.

“Best-case scenario, I thought we’d go to a playoff,” Guthrie said. “I definitely thought he’d get that up and in, or maybe chip it in.”

Faced with a tricky lie, Benjamin decelerated on the delicate chip and left it on the fringe, about 15 feet short of the hole. His spirited par putt raced past without breaking a bit.



Max Scodro went under par in each of his last two rounds to finish fourth.

WORTH EVERY PENNY.

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NOTES: BENJAMIN LOOKING FOR AUGUSTA POSTMARK

WHEN TALKING ABOUT the Masters, people tend to speak in hushed, reverent tones.

A sign of respect, perhaps, for some of the most hallowed ground in golf. But also, perhaps, as a way of not jinxing their access to an event touted as the toughest ticket in sports.

Brad Benjamin doesn't have to worry about a ticket to the 2010 Masters. Winning the U.S. Amateur Public Links in July earned the Rockford native an invitation to that tournament, provided, that is, he remains an amateur to that point.

"I don't know anything for certain and I haven't received the invitation yet," said Benjamin after his tie for second place. "But when the invitation comes, you can start using the facility and the course. As far as I know, when you get the invitation, you can go there somewhat regularly to play the course and practice.

"I heard Brandt Snedeker, after he won the (2003) Publinx, was down there and played some 45 practice rounds. Whether that's true or not, I don't know, but I heard it from a pretty reliable source."

Original plans to turn professional this fall have been put on hold because of the Masters, so the University of Memphis graduate plans to acclimate himself to the professional arena in another way.

"I'm going to move down there and take advantage of it to the fullest," he said of access to Augusta National. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I was going to move south anyway, maybe Atlanta, so it's really not that far off from what I was planning on doing."

JOHN EHROTT'S hopes of winning the State Amateur began to unravel on the sixth hole of the final round. He called a one-shot penalty on himself when his ball moved during a practice swing.



Nichele was perfect with one tee shot.



Ehrgott's final-round 72 included a penalty.

Ehrgott said his tee shot came to rest against a twig near a tree. While taking a practice swing that was restricted by the tree, his club brushed the twig, which caused the ball to move slightly. He called the one-shot penalty on himself and made double bogey.

DESPITE MISSING THE CUT by one shot after an 8-over 148, Ben Nichele nonetheless left the State Amateur with a great memory. The sophomore at Butler University, who prepped at Chicago Heights Marian

Catholic, made his second career hole-in-one during the first round. On the eighth hole, playing 175 yards to a back hole location, Nichele holed a 6-iron.

"It was a little thin, but it was on line," Nichele said. "I wasn't making any putts all day, so I was just glad I didn't have to putt it."

A SECOND-ROUND 80 dashed any hopes JaMichael Jones had of making the cut in his first Illinois State Amateur, but don't be surprised if he makes quite a name for himself. Jones is entering his senior year at Chicago Morgan Park Academy, a private school of 180 students on the city's south side. He finished tied for fourth at the Class 1A IHSA state finals as a junior. Earlier this summer, he was medalist at the State Amateur qualifier at PrairieView and qualified for the Big I Junior Championship in Ardmore, Okla. As for college golf, Jones said he wants to play "somewhere in a warm climate."

CHIP SHOTS. Sean Dozier had the biggest turnaround of any player to make the cut, posting rounds of 79-67. The Hudson native played his first 11 holes in 10 over, then went 4 under over his next 25 holes. Dozier, in a tie for 103rd after his opening 18, made the cut and also managed to gain an exemption from qualifying into next year's Illinois State Amateur after finishing in a tie for 15th place. . . . The CDGA received a record 782 entries, 24 more than the previous high in 2002. . . . The 14th hole, set up as a 478-yard par 5, gave up 17 eagles. It was the only hole to play under par, yielding a stroke average of 4.81.

—Greg Stewart

"I thought it was in, but it straightened out," Benjamin said. "It's disappointing to bogey the last hole and lose, but I had other opportunities on the back nine and didn't take advantage of them."

Then Guthrie had only one last player, Mitchell, to worry about.

Mitchell, knocking it stiff all morning but making nothing, made an eagle on the 14th and birdies at 16 and 17 to get within two shots of the lead. He hit driver on the 18th and knocked it in the front bunker, less than 10 yards from the front-right hole location.

"Two back on a driveable par 4, there was only one option," Mitchell said of his move to try and drive the green.

It almost paid off when his blast from the bunker came out high, landed soft and rolled toward the hole. He settled for a tap-in birdie and a share of second place, keeping his run alive of finishing in the top eight in each of his eight State Amateur starts.

"To win something like this, you have to have all phases of your game going," said Mitchell, last year's U.S. Mid-Amateur runner-up. "Nobody will have it all 72 holes because everybody struggles. I did the best I could with the last three holes. I knew I needed a miracle, but I hung in there."

Following the trophy presentation, Guthrie, Benjamin and Mitchell sat at a table in the clubhouse and answered questions from the media. Together, they represented the Illinois State Amateur champion, the Illinois Open winner and perhaps the state's best mid-amateur.

A week later, they would each leave for Southern Hills Country Club in Tulsa, Okla., to represent Illinois in the U.S. Amateur Championship.

"Illinois golf is in a good spot right now," said Guthrie, who might not be the best player on his college team that could be a legitimate contender for the 2010 NCAA title.

"You have to play well to be in contention and win. So it's pretty cool to have a title under my belt right now . . . and it's really cool to be called the best amateur in the state." 🏆

Greg Stewart covers golf for the Peoria Journal Star.