

Intelligencer Journal - July 18, 2008

Perseverance pays off for Denlinger

Overcomes summer of adversity to claim Lanco Junior Golf crown Perseverance pays off for Denlinger

BY JASON FULGINITI, Intelligencer Journal Sports Writer

It's become a ritual each summer for David Denlinger.

As soon as the school year ends, he ditches his backpack, grabs his bag of clubs and spends the next three months playing golf nearly every day.

Doesn't mean he still isn't learning.

In fact, so far this summer, Denlinger has learned a lot about the game, a ton about perseverance, a little about life and maybe even a little about himself.

And when one of the biggest tests of his summer was handed out Thursday, Denlinger aced it.

Erasing the memories of a summer that included plenty of adversity on the golf course to this point, Denlinger fired a 2-under 69 Thursday at Meadia Heights Golf Club to win the Lanco Susquehanna Bank Junior Championship by three shots.

Austin Wolf and Mark Dano both posted a 1-over 72 to finish tied for second, while Lauren Smith took the girls' title with an 86.

"It's big," Denlinger, a 17-year-old senior-to-be at Lancaster Mennonite, said of his first victory on the Lanco circuit. "And it gives me a lot of confidence to know I can go under par."

Especially considering the struggles he'd been enduring in recent weeks, when a few bad swings at all the wrong times were hindering what otherwise might have been a pretty solid summer on the golf course.

Take, for example, the pair of American Junior Golf Association events Denlinger played in last month, when he posted rounds of 75-79-81 to finish 42nd in the Heritage Junior Championship in Bluffton, S.C., before rounds of 82-77-88 left him in a tie for 64th a week later at the SAP Junior Open in Avon, Ohio.

In the latter of those, Denlinger said he hit five shots out of bounds in the tournament's three rounds and put six more balls in the water -- making it tough, obviously, to post good scores.

"I just was making big numbers," Denlinger explained. "I was getting off to bad starts and really couldn't bring it back. I felt like I was hitting really good shots but I was also hitting some really bad ones that were costing me a lot of (strokes).

"I was trying so hard in those AJGAs and it just kept getting worse," he continued. "But I knew if I kept working on it, and practicing, it would turn around because I was hitting good shots. And my dad kept saying it would turn around."

And who better to give such advice than Denlinger's father, Deryl, who won the 1993 and '95 Lanco Amateurs and was twice a member of the winning Lanco Two-Man Scramble (1996 and 2007) team?

But more importantly, a guy who has been around the game long enough to know that golf, all too often, is like life. Things aren't always going to be rosy. Pitfalls are out there. And when you fall into one, you've just got to regroup and dig your way out of it.

"It helps a lot because he has a lot of experience and he's gone through just about everything in golf," Denlinger said of his father. "He's gone through some bad streaks where he's struggling and it doesn't seem to be getting any better, but he knows if you keep working on it it'll change."

Things officially started to change for Denlinger during a Lancaster County Junior Golf Tour event at the Lancaster Host on July 9, when he shot 2-under 69 only to lose to Andrew Arnold by two shots.

He backed that up with a 74 that left him tied for first at Monday's LCJGT event at Tanglewood -- a round that could have been even better had he not three-putted four times.

But the biggest sign that all appears to be well came Thursday, when he hit 14 greens in regulation and was 4-under when he walked off the 15th green.

His only hiccup to that point was an errant tee shot that led to a bogey at the par-4 seventh. But he countered that with birdies on Nos. 5 (chip to 12 feet) 6 (drained a 40-foot putt), 9 (got up and down from 80 yards) 11 (nearly chipped in for eagle) and 15 (6-iron to three feet).

And it was somewhere around No. 16 that the reality of it all started to sink in.

"When I was 4-under after I birdied 15 I was feeling pretty good," Denlinger said. "And I think when I realized 'Oh, 4-under ... I can shoot 67,' it kind of hit me a little bit. And then I got a little nervous, and bogeyed the last two."

But despite being unable to recover from a tee shot into the right trees that led to a bogey at the par-5 17th, and short-siding himself with a missed approach shot that led to another bogey at the par-3 finishing hole, Denlinger had enough to go on.

Enough to know that his game was back. And more than enough to win.

"I just kind of hit good shot after good shot," Denlinger said. "And I tried not to think about winning and all the stuff that comes with it."

Like a valuable lesson in perseverance.

Note: Alex Palmer, playing in the 15-16 age group, aced the 157-yard, par-3 second hole using an 8-iron. It was his first hole-in-one.

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Lanco Junior Championship tees off this morning

For the first time in years, the Lanco Susquehanna Bank Junior Golf Championship will be missing Zak Drescher.

Not that the rest of the field will necessarily be missing him.

Ineligible, considering he's now a 19-year-old sophomore on the golf team at Campbell University in North Carolina, Drescher -- the winner of the last two Lanco Juniors -- will not be able to defend his crown when the tournament gets under way today at 8:30 a.m. at Meadia Heights Golf Club.

But a quick look at the leaderboard at Monday's Lancaster County Junior Golf Tour regular-season event at Tanglewood might give an indication of what players are ready to take Drescher's place.

The top-9 finishers from Monday's LCJGT event are in the field for today's one-day shootout, with each of Monday's top-6 finishers being ranked in the top-8 of the LCJGT's season-long points race.

Matt Burkhart, who recently finished tied for seventh in the Pennsylvania Golf Association Junior Championship, is the only player among the LCJGT's top-8 points leaders who isn't in today's field.

Among the most notable players to watch are Dan McCrudden -- who owns the LCJGT points lead thanks to victories in the series' first two events of the summer -- along with Casey Osborne, Alex Palmer and Andrew Arnold, who round out the top-four on the LCJGT's points list.

Austin Wolf, Frank Dano, David Denlinger and Zachary Hammer -- who hold spots six through nine on the LCJGT's points list -- are also in today's field.