

O'Connor earns U.S. Amateur spot as alternate

By Marty Budner • ECCENTRIC STAFF WRITER •
August 15, 2010

“So close, but so far away.”

That's how Bill O'Connor summed up his performance at the recent U.S. Amateur Sectional Q ualifier at Oakland Hills Country Club.

O'Connor had an excellent showing in the one-day, 36-hole qualifier Aug. 2 on the underrated Oakland Hills North Course. The Birmingham resident placed sixth with a six-over round of 146.

The result, however, left O'Connor in Amateur limbo.

The top four finishers, including co-medalist Francesco Ruffino of Bloomfield Village and Matt Alessi of Bloomfield Hills (third overall), earned automatic bids to the 2010 U.S. Amateur scheduled for Aug. 23-29 at Chambers Bay Golf Course in the state of Washington.

The next two finishers — Canadian Russell Budd and O'Connor — earned the first and second alternate spots. Basically, for O'Connor, that means the only way he would appear in his third U.S. Amateur is if two of the top four qualifiers from the Oakland Hills Sectional were unable to attend.

Chances of that happening are tantamount to shooting a hole-in-one. Although, in O'Connor's case, that slight chance does exist as he has carded an ace in his notable golf career.

“I'm very happy to be an alternate,” said O'Connor. “The second alternate has only a long shot of actually getting into the tournament. If one of the players from my site drops out, the USGA goes to the first alternate and a second (of the four) would need to drop out in order for me to go.

“I could go to Washington (Chambers Bay) and see if someone cannot play the day of the tournament and I could possibly get in that way,” he said. “That is something I am not going to do as time off from work without the certainty of playing is too much.”

O'Connor is a veteran of two previous U.S. Amateurs.

He played in the 2002 U.S. Amateur at Oakland Hills — his home course. His first was in 1994 at the TPC Sawgrass where he missed the cut by one stroke.

O'Connor was excited to have even been in the hunt for a third U.S. Amateur appearance after his early-round play two weeks ago on the North Course. The 1985 Brother Rice graduate triple-bogeyed his third hole and had to work hard to get back in contention.

“When I finished for the day, I didn't think I would even be that close (to landing an alternate spot), but the afternoon scores went higher than I predicted,” said O'Connor. “I had a five-putt on my third hole of the day, so missing by two is also frustrating, but again, better than I thought.

“After making the triple bogey on three (five-putt), I still had so much golf (another 33 holes) in front of me. I just had to stay focused and patient. I hit the ball pretty well throughout the day, but I wasn't making any great shots or putts, so my scoring wasn't sharp throughout the day.

“I have been working on that portion of my game, and I am now stepping up my practice in that area even further,” he said.

O'Connor also benefitted from course familiarity.

The North Course was Rice's home course during his all-star prep career when he registered his first

hole-in-one. Also, the North Course was set up this year in the same way it was for the 2002 U.S. Amateur.

“Having played in the U.S. Amateur at Oakland, the pins in the qualifier were the same as they were for the U.S. Am itself, so I have played those pins on a few different occasions,” said O'Connor. “The course was set up very difficult and the pin locations extremely tough with green speeds as fast as I have ever seen them. Scary fast. They took some time to get used to in the morning.”

Besides the two U.S. Amateurs, O'Connor has played in nine other USGA tournaments over the years. He played in the 1984 U.S. Junior Amateur and eight U.S. Mid-Amateurs where he once made it to the round of eight in match play at the Dallas Athletic Club.

That's a grand total of 11 USGA tournaments. He would love to make it an even dozen by playing this year's Amateur. Time will tell.