

### Smunk Wins The Lowcountry Amateur

How do you determine the best golfer in a region? Step one-select the most challenging golf course in the Charleston area. Step two- assemble a stellar field of players that includes former state champions, players ranked near the top of state rankings, about 25 young guns and collegiate golfers, club champions and the like. Step three-prepare the golf course for tournament play by mowing the greens down to lightning speed. Step four-set the pins in a series of diabolical pin positions that not only tests the player's physical abilities, but their course management skills of knowing when NOT to shoot for pins. Step five-gentlemen play well and have fun. Anyone that has ever played high level competitive golf can attest to the challenges that faced this year's field in the 11th Annual Lowcountry Amateur played at Pine Forest Country Club on August 16th to 18th.

As the tournament progressed it became a battle between two players, Bill Smunk and Ken Leopard. Smunk, the 1984 state champion and 1996 Lowcountry Amateur champion seized the first round lead with an opening round two-under par 70 to lead Leopard and two others by one stroke. In the second round, Leopard, a collegiate golfer for Wofford University, shot 70 to take a one stroke lead over Smunk with Roy Neal and Butch Crawford two strokes back.

After the round on Saturday, Bill Smunk decided to change putters because he was unhappy with his putting through the first two rounds. He pulled out a 40 year-old Bullseye putter that he last used over five years ago. This was the same putter that he had used to win the State Amateur in 1984 and set the tournament scoring record at the 1996 Lowcountry Amateur. In fact, the putter was older than all but about twenty players in the tournament.

In the final round, the question was whether the wisdom and experience of a former state and tournament champion could overcome the brute power and aggressiveness of youth. Whose game and nerves would be the strongest in the end? Smunk fired the first volley in the final round with a birdie on the tenth hole (his first hole) and played a very steady first nine holes in 35 strokes. Meanwhile, Leopard bogied the par three thirteenth hole and then aggressively tried to get home in two on the par five sixteenth hole and hit it into the water to the right of the green. The resulting bogey left him two shots behind Smunk with nine holes to play.

On the second nine, Leopard continued his roller-coaster round as he made two bogies and a birdie through the sixth hole falling three shots behind with three holes to play. Meanwhile, Bill Smunk continued his steady play, making par after par in the final round. Leopard needed a lot of help or a miracle finish to pull out a victory. Leopard kept himself alive with a great wedge shot on number seven to two-foot for an easy birdie. He then chipped in

for birdie from short of the green on the eighth to pull within one shot of the lead. Meanwhile, Smunk showed his championship mettle by making a difficult up and down of his own to save par and maintain his one shot advantage.

One stroke down and the final hole was a reachable par five. This is what tournament golf is about. After hitting their tee shots down the middle, both players had a shot to reach the green in two shots on the par five ninth hole. Leopard, possibly feeling the pressure, pushed his second shot to the right. The ball was knocked down by trees about 75 yards from the flag. Smunk's second was well struck and finished in the right greenside bunker some 25 yards from the hole. Leopard's third shot landed just a few feet from the hole and stopped about ten feet from the hole. This put the pressure squarely on Smunk's shoulders. He faced a very difficult uphill bunker shot from a poor lie with a big slope and a water hazard staring at him on the opposite side of the green. He had a one shot lead and his opponent, who had just made two birdies in a row, was looking at another opportunity to pull even. So what does this veteran do? Does he succumb to the pressure of the moment or does he hit a flawless shot to within 10 feet of the hole? Smunk's flawless shot put the pressure squarely on Leopard who would have to make his putt and hope that Smunk did not top him for the title. At least on this day, it was the young gun who blinked first as Leopard's ten footer was pushed badly to the right. Smunk, then, stepped up and calmly rolled his slick downhill putt into the hole to secure the victory. The victory was Smunk's second in the tournament and allows him to join Frank Ford III as the only two-time champions of the event.

At least for this week, wisdom and experience was enough to defeat the raw power and aggressiveness of youth. He even did it with a putter that was nearly twice his opponent's age...

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