

'Shot of His Life' Lifts Summerhays to Junior Am Title

By Ron Driscoll, USGA

What Happened:

It was only fitting that Preston Summerhays received the flag from the 17th hole as a memento at the closing ceremony of the 72nd U.S. Junior Amateur Championship at Inverness Club. His performance on the 489-yard par 4 was the difference in his 2-and-1 victory over Bo Jin in the 36-hole final match on Saturday.

In the morning 18, Summerhays pulled closer to Jin on the dogleg-left hole by purposely hitting his drive down the adjacent 16th fairway, knocking a wedge to 35 feet, and draining the right-to-left curling putt. In the afternoon, Summerhays hit "the shot of his life," according to his father and coach, Boyd, to set up a match-clinching birdie that gave him the Junior Amateur trophy, as well as a berth in the 2020 U.S. Open Championship at Winged Foot Golf Club.

"I don't even know how to explain how it felt," said Summerhays, 16, of Scottsdale, Ariz., after his victory. "It's just one of my goals being accomplished."

Summerhays seemed to have taken control in the seesaw match as it turned to the final nine. He birdied the par-4 10th and 11th holes to assume a 2-up lead, his largest of the day, thanks in part to a nice break on No. 11, when his wayward drive ended up on a forward tee for No. 13 and he capitalized by punching a 9-iron to 3 feet.

"I think just to get that momentum going on the last nine, that was a huge part of the match," said Summerhays, who won his second consecutive Utah Amateur last week. "But it clearly wasn't over yet."

Summerhays bunkered his approach on No. 13, then left his next shot in the bunker on the way to a bogey as he conceded the hole to Jin. Trailing by only one hole, Jin had a solid opportunity to square the match on the 34th hole. He found the green with his approach on the 398-yard par 4 and Summerhays overshot the green, then left his up-and-down effort in the rough. Summerhays wedged on to 15 feet, and after Jin hit his first putt to 6 feet, Summerhays curled in his putt for bogey. When Jin's par try slid by on the low side, the opportunity slipped past.

"Bo actually gave me a really nice read for my bogey putt," said Summerhays. "His putt went by 6 or 7 feet, and I visualized my putt going in. I hit a great putt and it went in just how I wanted it to."

"The three-putt on 16 was definitely not my best," said Jin, 17, of the People's Republic of China, who was attempting to become the first alternate to win the Junior Amateur since at least 2008. "It broke way more than I thought. I was just trying to go for my two-putt, but I hit a bad putt."

It appeared that Jin would have another chance to tie Summerhays on the next hole, No. 17. Jin drove into the fairway and Summerhays again opted to play his tee shot down the adjacent 16th fairway. This time, he missed his target and left himself in the rough between the fairways, with a large tree blocking his view.

"It wasn't a terrible lie, and I had 174 [yards] to the pin," said Summerhays. "Going downwind, downhill, it really didn't play 174, it played 145 to the front edge. I was like, I could get a pitching wedge over that tree and land it front edge and roll it back. I hit it great and it ended up going to 8 feet."

Jin then left his approach on the front of the green, skirted the hole with his long birdie try, then missed the comebacker. With two putts for the win, Summerhays made birdie to seal the victory.

“That's just a shot of a lifetime at the right time in the biggest tournament,” said Boyd Summerhays, who coaches several PGA Tour players, including world No. 17 Tony Finau, and walked the matches with his son. “He'll never forget that and it'll give him confidence when he's in a tough spot. When he hit it, I texted my wife and said that was the greatest shot of his life.”

“My dad has raised me to let go of bad shots quickly,” said Summerhays. “He's taught me that from a very young age, and that's helped me throughout my entire career.”

Summerhays jumped ahead with a birdie on the first hole of the day, but Jin rebounded to win holes 3 and 4 with pars and retained the lead throughout the morning 18. Summerhays closed the deficit to 1 hole at the lunch break with back-to-back birdies on Nos. 17 and 18.

“Bo played great; he made some great putts,” said Summerhays. “I just stayed patient. When you're in the final, the two players are obviously pretty good. On a course like this, you can have highs and lows. I knew that eventually I was going to start playing some better golf.”

Notable:

- Summerhays becomes the third U.S. Junior Amateur champion to earn an exemption into the U.S. Open. “I've had a goal since freshman year to play in a tour event before I graduate high school,” said Summerhays, who is No. 208 in the World Amateur Golf Ranking. “It's so cool this tournament gets an exemption. It's a huge opportunity, and I think that opportunity is going to be awesome and amazing in my progression as a player.”
- Both Summerhays and runner-up Bo Jin, who is No. 777 in the World Amateur Golf Ranking, earn exemptions into the 119th U.S. Amateur Championship next month at Pinehurst Resort & Country Club. Both players also have sisters (Grace Summerhays and Jiarui “Joyce” Jin) who are competing in the 71st U.S. Girls' Junior Championship next week at SentryWorld in Stevens Point, Wis.
- Summerhays is a native of Davis County, Utah, and his family moved to Scottsdale, Ariz., when he was 6. Scott Hailes (1995) of West Bountiful is the only other Utah native to win the Junior Amateur. Hailes' road to the title included a 19-hole, Round-of-16 win over Boyd Summerhays, Preston's father. Hailes is Summerhays' cousin, and Boyd caddied for Scott in his ensuing matches at Fargo (N.D.) Country Club.
- International players are now 3-7 in U.S. Junior Amateur finals when playing an American opponent. Terry Noe (1994), Sihwan Kim (2004) and Min Woo Lee (2016) are the three foreign-born players to have won the title.

Quotable:

“When push comes to shove, he does believe he can pull off the shot or make the putt. I've seen it a lot on different levels. Local tournaments, State Amateurs. And to do it on the biggest stage, the biggest tournament, he knew what was on the line. That's just going to fill him up with more confidence. I'm excited for him being able to accomplish his goal of winning the U.S. Junior.” – **Boyd Summerhays**, Preston's father, who followed his son all week

“My uncle Tony plays on the PGA Tour. He’s always been great to me. I’ve played hundreds of rounds with him and been able to kind of feed off what he’s doing, what I need to do better in my game to get to his level.” – **Preston Summerhays**, on PGA Tour pro **Tony Finau**, whose longtime swing coach is Preston’s father, Boyd,

“I’m so proud of you, man. I’m getting chills just talking to you. How’s it feels to be a champ?” – **Tony Finau**, Preston Summerhays’ close family friend, to Preston via Facetime shortly after Preston’s victory

“All your hard work and dedication is paying off. This is just the beginning, bro. I’m so happy for you, man. I gotta take care of my job tomorrow now.” – **Finau**, who is tied for eighth at The Open Championship going into Sunday’s final round at Royal Portrush

“To come in as alternate and make it so far, I’m definitely really happy. I’m not fully happy with the result, but I’ve got to be happy to come in as an alternate and make it all the way to the final match.” – **Bo Jin**