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When Eddie Heinen got his amateur status back last August, he wanted to test his game against California's best amateurs. He passed with flying colors, winning the 91st California Amateur Championship at Pebble Beach Golf Links with four consecutive 1-up victories.

*Text and Photos by
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To say that Eddie Heinen was an unknown quantity entering the 91st California Amateur Championship would be the understatement of the decade. "Eddie who?" was a familiar refrain as the week progressed.

The 32-year-old Las Vegas resident had only gotten his amateur status back in August after an eight-year struggle on professional mini-tours in the U.S. and Canada.

Back in the amateur ranks, Heinen discovered that golf was, once again, fun. "I used to toss and turn at night worrying about missed putts and disappointments," explained Heinen. "That's what life is like when you're grinding to make a paycheck. Now I've learned to let it go, to enjoy the fact that I'm playing golf on beautiful courses. I'm having fun again."

However, Heinen's relaxed attitude didn't quench his competitive spirit. "You have to keep challenging your-

Eddie Heinen's laser-like irons were instrumental in helping him win the 91st California Amateur Championship at Pebble Beach Golf Links.

self," said Heinen, who is busy developing a series of putting courses near the McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas, "to test your game against the best players."

So Heinen, who plays golf frequently with his brother in Santa Barbara, joined a SCGA club, tied for medalist honors in California Amateur Championship qualifying at Antelope Valley CC, and headed north to Pebble Beach with his wife, Jonna.

"I really had no great expectations heading into the tournament," Heinen would recount after the week was over. "I just wanted to play Pebble Beach and Spanish Bay, treat my wife to a nice vacation and see how things went."

He's not an unknown quantity any more.

After shooting 153, the qualifying cutline after two stroke play rounds, Heinen (seeded No. 31 of 32) knocked off the No. 2 seed, 2000 U.S. Mid-Amateur champion Greg Puga, 4 & 3, in the first round. He then won three consecutive 1-up victories — beating Northern California veteran Bob Niger, defending NCGA Amateur champion and *Player of the Year* Matt Bettencourt, and 47-year-old Buzz Peel, the No. 3 seed and a quarterfinalist last year — to reach the finals.

Lastly, in a 36-hole match that went to the final putt on the final hole, Heinen completed his Cinderella week by edging Fresno State student Jonathan Echols, 1 up, to win the title.

For the 22-year-old Echols, losing was a bitter disappointment. He had reached the quarterfinals last year and was hoping to take the ultimate step this year. "I played well but couldn't make enough putts," said Echols later.

Fairways and greens — a mantra that major golf championship winners from Ben Hogan to Tiger Woods have preached — was Heinen's philosophy all week, and nowhere was it more evident than in the championship match.

Heinen missed only one fairway in the morning portion, which saw 11 lead changes and just four halved holes. Heinen had three birdies on the front nine while Echols made four as the pair battled back and forth.

The back nine continued to be a slugfest, albeit with slightly higher scores. Heinen won the 10th with a par 4, but Echols responded with a par for victory on the par-four 11th. Heinen regained his 1-up margin with a par 3 on the 12th, but Echols once again squared the match with a birdie 4 on No. 14 after Heinen hit his second shot out of bounds.

On the 401-yard 16th, Heinen stiffed an eight-iron shot to within six inches of the hole to regain the lead. On the 208-yard, par-three 17th, Echols' tee shot plugged in a bunker behind the green, while Heinen's tee shot was on the wrong side of the hourglass-shaped green. Echols could make no better than 4, while Heinen putted to within five feet and then sank the par putt.

Despite losing the 18th hole by missing a five-foot birdie putt, Heinen had a 1-up lead heading into the afternoon round. "I had missed a lot of four- and five-footers during the week," Heinen said. "One more wasn't going to make a difference, although the hole could have been a turning point."



When Jonathan Echols blocked his tee shot out of bounds on the 28th hole of the championship match, he put himself in a 2-down hole from which he could not recover.



Enough of Eddie Heinen's putts fell to help him earn four consecutive 1-up victories en route to the California Amateur Championship.



A pair of 40-somethings, Buzz Peel (above) and Scott Terry, (below) reached the semifinals of the California Amateur Championship.



The miss loomed even larger when Echols won the first hole of the afternoon with a par 4 to square the match, but Heinen's relentless tee-to-green play never let Echols get the upper hand.

Despite brisker winds and bumpier greens, which made scoring more difficult in the afternoon, Heinen never let up, taking the lead for good when he won the fifth hole with a par 3.

From then on, Heinen was relentless, hitting every fairway and missing only one green from the seventh hole to the conclusion of the match. "The greens at Pebble are small," explained Heinen later, "and that plays into my strength, which is my ability to control the distance on my iron shots."

Echols was nearly as proficient until the 373-yard, par-four 11th hole when he blocked his tee shot out of bounds, allowing Heinen to take a 2-up lead. "That was a turning point," Heinen said after the match, "because I knew that I was going to be able to hit fairways and greens and that it would be tough to make birdies coming home into the wind."

Nonetheless, the match went to the 18th hole as Echols hung tough, saving par from the right rough with a delicate chip on No. 15 and winning the 17th after Heinen's tee shot landed in the same bunker behind the green that Echols had visited in the morning.

Faced with an awkward lie, Heinen failed to get out of the bunker and Echols parred the hole to send it to the 543-yard, par-five 18th hole, perhaps the most famous finishing hole in golf.

After both players split the fairway with their drives, Heinen's second shot landed in deep rough near a tree, while Echols' second was in lighter rough but also on the right. Heinen knocked his approach shot safely on the green, 15 feet below the hole, while Echols' approach came up short on the front of the green, 35 feet away from the hole. Echols missed his birdie putt and Heinen two-putted to win the match.

Until Echols reached the finals, this year's tournament looked like one for the aged. Six of the eight quarterfinalists were over age 30 — four of them were age 40 or more, including Mark (Buzz) Peel, who was bidding, at age 47, to become the oldest player ever to win the championship.

Heinen and Echols had plenty of adventures in their trips to the championship match.

Heinen's semifinal match against Peel proved to be titanic. Heinen jumped out to a 3-up lead as he birdied four holes and shot 32 on the front side. Heinen was still 3 up after No. 11, but Peel slowly whittled the margin and finally pulled even when he sank a 12-foot birdie putt on the par-four 16th hole.

On the 208-yard, par-three 17th, Peel's 3-iron tee shot landed in a tough lie in the front bunker. Heinen followed by playing a 2-iron that barely carried the bunker, landing in the fringe. "I was going for the fat part of the green," said Heinen later. "If I had been shooting for the flagstick, it wouldn't have made it." Peel took two to get out of the bunker and Heinen ultimately won the hole with a bogey 4.

Needing to win the 18th hole to extend the match, Peel tried to cut the dogleg on the 543-yard, par-5 hole, but pulled his tee shot



Don DuBois (left) became the 81st medalist in California Amateur history to fail to win the championship. In addition to Eddie Heinen and Jonathan Echols, Mark Warman (center) and Ed Cuff (right) were SCGA members who reached the quarterfinals.

slightly and watched in dismay as it landed in the ocean. After Heinen played safely to the green in three shots, Peel conceded the match.

"He had to play aggressively on that tee shot," said Heinen later. "If he had hit it like he hit his second drive (which was 300 yards long in the left-center of the fairway), I would have had to play the hole much differently. But that's the fun of match play."

Echols, the No. 25 seed, defeated first-round stroke play leader Bill Moore, 3 & 2, knocked out recent Santa Clara University graduate Sandy Horacek, 4 & 3, and held off 1998 California Amateur champion Ed Cuff, 2 & 1, to reach the semifinals, where he faced 40-year-old Scott Terry.

Echols had to rally from 3-down after five holes against Terry, who had never gone beyond the second round of this tournament before this year. "I knew that I'd better kick it in gear pretty quick or I wasn't going to be around tomorrow," said Echols later. Echols finally squared the match on the 17th hole, after Terry's tee shot landed in the ocean.

The playoff went back to 17 and both players made par from the back fringe, each sinking four-foot putts. Then on No. 18, after Terry had placed his approach shot to within 15 feet of the flagstick, Echols hit an 85-yard "punch sand wedge" to within 10 inches of the flagstick. After Terry's birdie putt slid past the cup, Echols sank his tap-in for the victory.

Heinen has also won three events in the Southern Nevada Golf Association (including the 2002 Southern Nevada Amateur), but his ultimate goal is to play in The Masters. "I figured my chances to make Augusta were better as an amateur than as a professional," Heinen explained (the two U.S. Amateur finalists and the winners of the U.S. Amateur Public Links and U.S. Mid-Amateur get invitations to The Masters).

Stay tuned this summer and fall.