

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Patrick Nagle moved quietly through a turbulent week, then provided an electrifying finish to his victory over Spencer Levin to win the 92nd California Amateur Championship


Text and photos by Robert D. Thomas

In a week that saw swirling subplots, two serious turns at the history book and the controversial antics of Spencer Levin, Patrick Nagle stepped softly through the week at Pebble Beach. But in the end, the slim 18-year-old resident of Pacifica (south of San Francisco) delivered the most explosive moment of all, holing out on the 33rd hole of the final match to defeat Levin and win the 92nd California Amateur Championship, 4 & 3.

Nagle wasn't exactly unknown entering the event. Last summer, he captured the Northern California Golf Association and California State Junior Amateurs, then moved on to the University of Illinois where he was named to the first-team freshman All-American team and third team overall. At the NCAA Division I championship, he set a course record at Oklahoma State's Karsten Creek Golf Course with a third-round 66.

"Even though I had never played Pebble Beach or Spyglass," said Nagle, "I felt really confident coming into this tournament, especially after that round at the NAAs." That confidence increased when, after opening with a 75 at Pebble, he came back with a 1-under-par 71 at Spyglass to become the fourth seed in match play.

That Nagle escaped a good deal of notice early on was due, in large part, to defending



Radar-like driving was instrumental in Patrick Nagle's victory in the 92nd California Amateur Championship.



Patrick Nagle got up and down from the rough on No. 17 and went on to oust defending champion Eddie Heinen in the California Amateur semifinals

champion Eddie Heinen, who was bidding to become the first person since Dr. Frank "Bud" Taylor in 1954-55 to win back-to-back California Amateur titles.

When Heinen won his first two matches this year, dispatching Rick Martin and NCGA Publinks champion Logan Goettsch by identical 4 & 3 margins, he seemed poised to make a serious run at consecutive championships.

Standing in Heinen's way was Buzz Peel, a quarterfinalist in 2001 who had dropped a 2-up semifinal decision to Heinen last year. At age, 48, Peel was bidding to become the tournament's oldest winner ever.

Heinen had a secret weapon this year: Masters champion Mike Weir, a long-time friend and business associate, who gave Heinen a couple of putting tips heading into the tournament. "Mike taught me to pick out a spot on the green as a target and then focus on that spot," says Heinen. "Win or lose, I need to trust the spot and it's beginning to pay dividends."

Heinen's putter was red-hot against Peel. He posted three birdies and only one bogey, built a 6-up lead after eight holes and cruised to a 5 & 3 victory, making Heinen the first defending champion since Mark O'Meara in 1980 to reach the semifinals.

Heinen's sterling play continued in his semifinal match against Nagle; the only problem was that his opponent played even better. Heinen had four birdies and 14 pars in 18 holes . . . and lost a dramatic, up-and-down match.

Nagle (who made six birdies on the round) took a quick 3-up lead when he birdied Nos. 3, 4 and 5, but when Heinen won the seventh with a birdie 2 and the eighth and ninth with pars, the match was back to all square.

Heinen gained the lead by winning the 11th with a par 4. Nagle responded immediately, draining a 20-footer for birdie 2 on the 12th, then sank 15-foot putts for birdie on Nos. 14 and 15 to go 2-up. "As the week has gone along," said Nagle, "I've learned how the ocean affects the break on the greens."

Heinen birdied the par-four 16th to cut the margin in half but could not climb the final mountain. Reflecting on shooting 4-under-par and losing, Heinen said philosophically, "That's match play."

Among the 16 players on the other side of the bracket were several well-known names: 2001 California Amateur champion Darryl Donovan, four-time SCGA Amateur champion Craig Steinberg, former two-time NCGA Player of the Year Randy Haag and defending SCGA Amateur champion Nico Bollini. Only Bollini made it past the first round (and he lost in overtime to St. Mary's College golf coach Scott Hardy).

That left a bevy of mid-amateurs (the age 25-and-up crowd) and the 19-year-old Levin (his name is pronounced Le-VEEN), whose year has been as volatile as his temperament.

Last August, he was disqualified from the San Joaquin Amateur after a temper tantrum; a week later, he became one of the youngest winners of the NCGA Amateur Championship. He then reached the quarterfinals of the U.S. Amateur before falling to eventual champion Ricky Barnes, 4 & 3.

He began at UCLA in the fall but left in the spring. "I came to UCLA expecting to improve my golf game," said Levin during the California Amateur, "but I didn't feel like I was progressing at all. I came home to work with my dad (Don, a teaching professional at Lighthouse GC in West Sacramento) and things immediately began to get better."

Levin shot 65-67-68 in the first three rounds of the prestigious Azalea Invitational at the Golf Club of Charleston, building a seven-shot lead. He won by five despite shooting 4-over-par 75 on the last day.

Like Nagle, he came into the California Amateur full of confidence; unlike Nagle, he wasn't shy about touting his chances: "I think I'm the best golfer in California and I'm out to prove it this week."

Levin's length and accuracy off the tee, imaginative short game and solid putting were impressive. His attitude and course demeanor were not. "Irritating" and "weird" were two of the gentler descriptions of his behavior.

Levin didn't need to play the 17th or 18th holes in any of his matches until the morning portion of the championship, taking out Donovan, 3 & 2, in the first round and pounding Scott Anderson of Palmdale, 7 & 6, to reach the quarterfinals where he eliminated Greg Uberuaga of San Diego, 3 & 2.

"I just couldn't make any birdies," said Uberuaga after losing to Levin (in fact, he made two — on Nos. 3 and 9 — but none after that). "I missed too many shots on the back nine against a player of Spencer's caliber."

In the semifinals, Levin faced 38-year-old Scott Almquist of Santa Ana, who was returning to California Amateur match play after a 15-year-absence (he reached the quarterfinals in 1986, while a student at San Diego State, and lost a first-round match in 1988).

The two battled back and forth until Levin took the lead for good on the sixth hole with a birdie 4 and extended it by winning the seventh with a par 3. "I found a swing key on No. 6," said Levin later, "and I played really well after that." Levin made birdie 3 on the 11th hole and when he won the next hole with a par-3, the handwriting was on the wall.

"I just ran out of gas," said the 38-year-old Almquist. "I lost my focus and just couldn't get any putts to fall. He's too good for me to win playing that way."

That set up a final match featuring the two youngest players since Curtis Worley defeated Mike Brannan in 1974 in a match of 18-year-olds.

Nagle's ability to ignore poor shots proved to be a key. Twice in the morning round, he rebounded from mistakes with birdies and finally took a 1-up lead at the break when he birdied the 17th and 18th holes.

But the biggest moment came on No. 8 in the afternoon when Nagle was 2-up after making a birdie 4 on the sixth.

Both players hit excellent tee shots. Nagle found a bunker on the right side of the green with his second shot, while Levin rifled his second shot over the flagstick into a bunker. Nagle blasted to within two feet, but the ball stayed above the hole. Levin was long with his bunker shot, then missed the putt and Nagle looked to go 3-up. However, Nagle missed the short putt and the ball rolled nearly five feet past. He quickly putted again and missed again. His margin had dropped to 1-up.



Spencer Levin came within one match of winning the California Amateur.



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Eddie Heinen's (above, left) bid to repeat as California Amateur champion was foiled when he lost 1-up to Patrick Nagle in the semifinals.

Scott Almquist (center) fell to Spencer Levin, 4 & 3, in their semifinal match.

Greg Uberuaga (right) lost a quarterfinal match to Spencer Levin, 3 & 2.

"I had the first putt just inside the left side," Nagle said later. "I sort of pushed it and it bounced, too. I hit it firm because I wanted to keep it on line." What about the next putt? "That was kind of dumb," he again smiled. "I never got the line or anything."

Nagle put the negative out of his thinking process. "The wind had come up," he said, "and the course was starting to play tough. I thought if I could make some pars and a couple of birdies that I would be okay."

Both players made pars on Nos. 9 and 10 (the 27th and 28th holes of the match) before Levine made a crucial putting miscue on the 11th. He made a good bunker shot to within eight feet but missed the putt and was 2-down with seven to play.

"I couldn't make a putt all day," said Levine. "I got mad on No. 11 and that cost me on 12." On that par-3, he misfired on a tee shot that fell well short of the green. Nagle's 4-iron was just off the green and he two-putted for a par. Levin chipped well, but again missed from eight feet. Now he was 3-down.

That margin went to four on the next hole when Nagle coaxed in an 18-foot birdie putt. Levin got one hole back on the long par-five 14th, hitting driver-driver just into the rough short of the green and lobbing a wedge to within 10 feet. Nagle managed to get a par, but Levin made his putt to cut the deficit to three holes.

That set up what proved to be the final hole, which ended when Nagle spun his second shot back into the cup on the par-4 15th hole for an eagle.

Even Nagle, who is referred to as "Neagle" by his University of Illinois teammates because of his propensity for eagles, was somewhat stunned by the shot. Momentarily he did not realize the match was over. "Then, I figured it out," smiled the soft-spoken champ. He walked across the fairway to shake hands with Levin, who had just bunkered his second shot.

"I had 105 yards to the pin," recounted Nagle later. "I hit a pitching wedge. That's the way I have been playing this hole all week."

"My hat's off to Patrick," said Levine after the match. "He made a double and still kept it together ... I missed putts I usually make."

"It really hasn't sunk in yet," Nagle said when asked how he felt. "I know I really hit a good shot there," he said while pointing at the 15th green. That, for the 2003