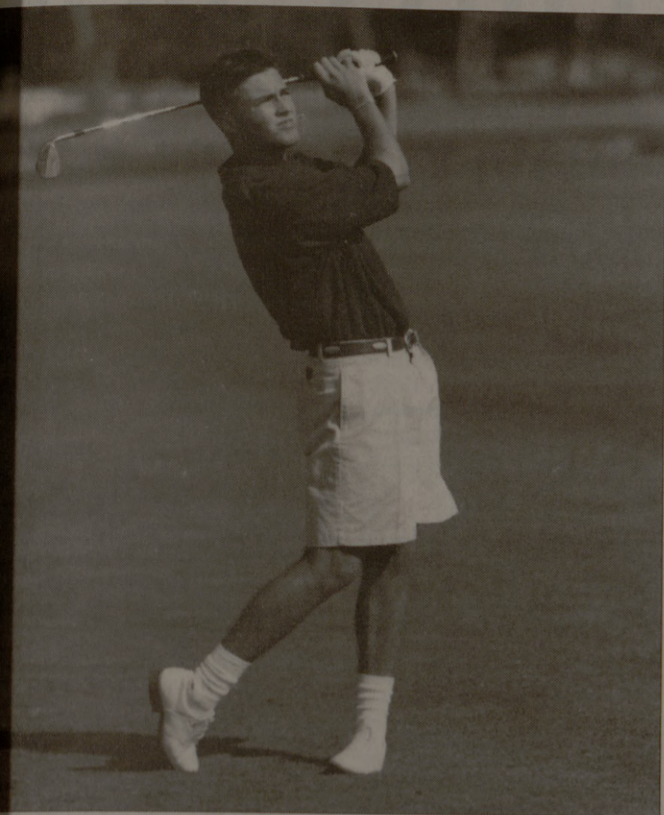


Into the Great Wide Open

A&M junior golfer Ryan Palmer takes aim at the chance of a lifetime at the U.S. Open



By GRANT HAWKINS
Staff writer

Monday, June 8, 1998, is a day Ryan Palmer will not soon forget. He hosted the sectional qualifying for the U.S. Open Championship. The Texas A&M junior had 36 grueling holes of golf ahead of him and only the top two finishers would qualify for the second major of the PGA season.

"I teed off at 7:30 a.m.," Palmer said. "I shot a morning round of 74, and I thought Billy Ray Brown and David Toms (PGA notables) would shoot lower than they did."

"I then started thinking I better stick around just in case I made a playoff."

— Ryan Palmer
Texas A&M junior golfer

Nine hours later, Palmer sank a 20-footer for birdie on the 18th hole for a one-under par 70 and a two-round total of 144, not knowing it would force a playoff for the second qualifying spot. "I changed clothes, packed my golf clubs, and was ready to go," he said. "I

then started thinking I better stick around just in case I made a playoff."

The playoff lasted three holes. Both Palmer and Jamie Gomez, who had Palmer's former Texas A&M teammate Miguel del Angel as his caddy, bogeyed the first playoff hole.

After both made par at 18, it was back to the difficult par-4 10th, where Gomez was left with a 30-foot birdie putt, and Palmer was front and right, with the pin cut back and left.

"I had a 70-footer for birdie and I rolled it 10 feet past," Palmer said. "He (Gomez) left his birdie putt short. I then told Dad (who was caddying for him) that this one was going in. I hit it center cut."

Gomez missed his putt for par, and Palmer said he was living a dream. He had qualified for the U.S. Open.

"At first I thought it was sort of a big deal, but then I realized this was a really big deal," Palmer said. "To be playing in my first pro event, and for it to be the U.S. Open, it really is a dream come true."

Palmer has been on cloud nine ever since. One of the first people he contacted was Bob Ellis, his golf coach at A&M.

"He called me after he qualified," Ellis

said. "I wrote him a note and told him that he belongs there."

Palmer's qualifying has exemplified the type of golf he has been playing in 1998. Coach Ellis said Palmer's attitude has made the difference.

"I tell my players, it is not what happens to you on the golf course, it is how you handle what happens to you that will make the difference," he said.

"Ryan's attitude and how he has been able to accept it when he doesn't hit the perfect shot has been the differ-

ence for him." Palmer now has to prepare for some of the subtle differences that accompany golf at the professional level. One of the bigger differences is having a caddy on the pro tour.

Palmer's dad, Butch, caddied for him at the sectional qualifying and will be on his bag at the Open this week.

"He keeps me loose, and it is someone to talk to," the younger Palmer said. "Most of all though, he keeps me loose and that is going to be important at the Open."

Another difference, Coach Ellis points out, is the tendency to do what he calls "rubber necking."

"When you get to that level, you have a tendency to rubber neck," Ellis said. "You cannot get caught up in looking around saying, 'Wow, there is Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer.' You have to believe you belong at that level, and I know Ryan does."

Palmer has been preparing for the fast greens and thick rough that are characteristic of a U.S. Open-type course back home in Amarillo.

The greenskeeper at his country club cut down the greens for him, and is let-



TEED OFF Ryan Palmer (above, with A&M coach Bob Ellis) will tee off on Thursday at the Olympic Club in San Francisco for the second major of the PGA tour season, the U.S. Open Championship. Palmer's father will caddy for the Aggie junior.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SPORTS INFORMATION

ting the rough grow out.

Palmer has never played at The Olympic Club in San Francisco, hosting its fourth U.S. Open this week, but he said he knows the hard part is over.

Palmer leaves today for probably the biggest week of his golfing life. The chances are good that he might run into Fred Couples, Palmer's favorite golfer growing up, during practice rounds on Tuesday and Wednesday.

He will probably see the legendary Nicklaus sometime this week. The star power at a major PGA tournament is enough to test the mettle of even the seasoned veterans on the tour. Palmer's nerves will be tested and he knows it. The question is how will he deal with the pressure.

"It's going to be nerve racking, but I know I can do it," he said. "I just hope to God I can get off the first tee okay."

On Thursday, after hitting some range balls and practicing his short game for a while, Palmer, with his father by his side, will walk up to the first tee of the U.S. Open.

A sea of people will be hovering around the tee box. Before he is about to tee-off, an older man, wearing a coat and tie, will step out onto the box. A hush will come over the gallery.

"This is the 9:37 a.m. tee time. Playing out of Amarillo, Texas, please welcome, Ryan Palmer."

The gallery will give a smattering of applause for the young man and Palmer's first professional tournament will be underway.

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