

Amateur Captures 2004 Utah Open

By Kurt Kragthorpe

Professional golf tournaments such as the Siegfried & Jensen Utah Open simply are not designed to be won by an amateur. Because nobody expects there be a tie for low pro honors, the oversized cardboard check is made out in advance for the full amount, leaving room only for the winner's name.

Because winning the low amateur award is considered an achievement in itself, the trophy the player gets to keep is often a duplicate of the real thing.



Greg Buckway
2004 Utah Open Winner

That explains why Weber State golfer Greg Buckway of West Jordan has two clocks and nobody claimed the \$15,000 first prize in the 2004 Utah Open, which concluded Aug. 1 at Alpine Country Club. After the final round of the Utah Open ended under ideal conditions, a ferocious wind struck Alpine, breaking off tree limbs as Buckway was submerged in a soft leather chair in the clubhouse, trying to explain how an amateur golfer won the tournament for the first time in 29 years.

"I'm glad I'm finished," Buckway said.

In any case, more people than usual went home happy. "I'm glad he's an amateur," Kent Abegglen said of Buckway, whose closing 70 and 12-under-par total were good for a three-stroke win over Utah County residents Abegglen and Tommy Johnson. The pros split first- and second-place money, earning \$12,500 each. While there's a playoff provision for low amateur honors, the co-low pros were just left to fight over the souvenir check, which gave the 6-foot-6 Johnson a distinct advantage.

Question of the day: Why had no amateur won this event since Brigham Young golfer

Mike Brannan in 1975? Better question: Why Buckway? Shortly after Brannan's victory, the Utah Open evolved into one of the country's top tournaments, this side of the PGA Tour —particularly in the 1980s, before the Nationwide Tour was founded. So it was rare for a Utah club pro to contend, much less an amateur. But since the Utah Section PGA took over the event in 2000 and filled the field with more Utah pros, everybody has a better chance. Thanks partly to a conflict with the Colorado Open, a remarkably high percentage of the 2004 pro purse went to Utahns. Not coincidentally, local amateurs made their biggest impact ever, as 17 of them made the cut, Buckway won the tournament and Tadd Cox tied for fifth, shooting Sunday's low round (68). Before Buckway's accomplishment is diminished in any way, consider that his winning score was the same as Boyd Summerhays' total at Alpine in 2002.

So why Buckway? These days, the average college golfer is that good, for one thing. So even if had not win a tournament since junior golf, he was as capable as

anybody. "If I didn't expect myself to do well, I wouldn't have forked over the money to go play," he said. Buckway may have lost a first-round match in the recent State Amateur, but he reached the semifinals in 2003, shortly after returning from an LDS Church mission. His victory was a breakthrough for Weber State, 30 years after Wildcat golfer Mike Malaska — now a renowned teaching pro who tied for fifth this year — won the Utah Open.

History shows that Buckway was a wire-to-wire winner. Yet as of the first round, he was just another name on a long list of co-leaders. There were five of them, to be exact, and the big story was that one was named Thurman. Annie Thurman deservedly has received a lot of recognition for her golf exploits and gender breakthroughs in Utah tournaments this summer. Yet in the Utah Open's first round, she merely was the Other Thurman.

Playing in the same group as his younger sister, Adam Thurman shot a 5-under-par 67 to share the lead.

Asked about stealing the spotlight from his sister, Thurman said, "I'd rather have it on her, and kind of go and do my own thing." In one of golf's ironies, Thurman had played so well that he put himself in an comfortable position. The next day, he posted an 82 and missed the 36-hole cut by two strokes.

The strange thing is, Buckway was afraid of doing something like that himself. "I've been that guy before," he said after the tournament.

Yet Buckway came out Saturday and one-putted his first seven greens on the way to another 67. At 10 under par for the tournament, he was two strokes ahead of Abegglen and Johnson, who were intriguing stories themselves.

Friday, Abegglen's drama had come on the way to the course. Car trouble on the drive from his home in southern Utah County forced him to switch vehicles with his wife, who works in Provo, and he arrived at Alpine just six minutes before his afternoon tee time. Abegglen birdied his first two holes "right out of the car," he said. "Just kind of unconscious, I think."

Abegglen, 41, was a head pro at Sunset View Golf Course in Delta for nine years, but moved to the farm community of Genola to be closer to his wife's work. He teaches at South Mountain Golf Club in Draper. Free from administrative duties, "I've actually enjoyed golf a lot more this year, for the first time in a long time," he said. Speaking of a long time, Abegglen figures he last was in a position like this in the 1980 State Junior Open. Playing golf "is not actually what I do for a living, so I'm just trying to relax and enjoy the bogeys as best I can," he said.

Johnson, 35, formerly worked at The Reserve at East Bay in Provo, but is now unaffiliated, with designs on playing full-time. But a lack of sponsorship has kept him from traveling much and he's ineligible for most Utah Section PGA events, so a tie fourth place in the Provo Open was his previous biggest highlight of 2004. "It's been a rough year, honestly," he said after the second round, having posted a 66. "I haven't done diddly all year." So the stage was set for an interesting Sunday — and then nothing happened. At least, nobody made a run at the three leaders, who were not exactly pulling away, either.

Abegglen, playing in only his third tournament of the year, had a chance to take control. He led by one stroke after 11 holes, bogeyed No. 12, barely missed a birdie putt at No. 13 and failed to birdie the par-5 No. 14 after having to play a left-handed shot from up against a tree. That allowed Buckway to take the lead for good with a two-putt birdie.

"Realistically, I don't think we put enough pressure on [Buckway]," Abegglen said, after he and Johnson each closed with a 71. Weber State coach Dave Kearn describes Buckway as a "gamer," who usually gets the most of his rounds with his scoring ability. That was true down the stretch Sunday, when he got up and down on Nos. 15, 16 and 17 — twice from bunkers, including once when he experimented with a pitching wedge out of the sand.

He finished in style, with birdies on three of the last five holes.

"He was as cool as he could be," Johnson said. The pros figured their playing partner was thriving partly because he had no house payments to make and was playing only for the low amateur's \$600 pro shop certificate — besides the clocks. "You could just tell he wasn't too stressed, which helped him, I'm sure," Johnson said.

Buckway countered: "I felt the pressure. I came out trying to love the pressure, rather than hate it."

That attitude worked, to a history-making degree.