Penalty proves costly to Eaton

Schabacker wins state stroke play championship by one shot

By GARY BAINES
Camera Sports Writer

Few sports penalize players for seemingly insignificant matters quite the way golf does.

Just ask Craig Stanler, victim of the old building-a-stance-with-a-towel rule at the Andy Williams Open early this year.

Larry Eaton can relate, being similarly treated by the Rules of Golf.

Eaton finished second by one shot to John Schabacker in the State Amateur Stroke Play tournament at Boulder Country Club.

By coincidence, Eaton was penalized one shot on the 10th hole Sunday when his ball rolled over the green as he was setting up to address his putt.

Eaton called the violation on himself, and as it later turned out, it cost him an opportunity to win the tournament in sudden death. As it was, the 56-year-old from Greeley finished runner-up for the second straight year.

"As it happens in golf, those mistakes often end up being important," he said. "It made the difference between losing and being in a playoff."

Still, it would be wrong to take anything away from Schabacker's victory because of the ruling.

The 21-year-old from Englewood had plenty of chances to fold under Sunday's final-round pressure, but never did.

Despite being in position to win a major tournament for the first time, he finished with a 1-over-par 73 and a four-day total of 8-over-par 288.

With his penalty stroke, Eaton shot 70 Sunday and came in at 289. 8th match play champion Gary Longfellow was another stroke back after a 72, while former University of Colorado golfer Mark Crabtree was fourth at 291.

Eaton's situation on the 10th hole was crucial to the tournament because it allowed Schabacker to take the lead for good.

Instead of matching Schabacker's par on the hole, Eaton had to settle for a bogey. On the 11th, Schabacker sank a 16-foot birdie to give himself a two-shot edge.

"On 11 I kind of broke out," said Schabacker. "I felt bad for Eaton after No. 10, but it's just something that happens."

A 15-foot birdie on the par-3 16th put Eaton back to within a stroke, and the opportunities for him to catch Schabacker were there on the last three holes.

On No. 16, Schabacker calmly rolled in a 10-foot for par after missing the green. And on the 17th, Eaton lipped out a 15-foot birdie attempt.

But Eaton's best chance came on the final hole, a 444-yard par 4.

There, Schabacker put his tee shot to the right, at the base of a tree, while Eaton drove into the center of the fairway.

"I had an opportunity to pick up at least one shot there," Eaton said. "I had 210 yards to the green and thought I'd have to hit my long iron so hard that I made a bad shot." He ended up 50 yards short of the flagstick.

Then it was Schabacker's turn. "The main thing was not to choke and make (double bogey)," he said. "I just wanted to get the ball in the fairway and hope to get lucky." He accomplished his goal, chipping out from under the tree to the left side of the fairway, then hitting his approach shot on the green, but some 70 feet from the flag. Eaton, however, could put no pressure on as he left his third shot 50 feet short of the pin.

Like on 17, Eaton lipped out his putt, and both players finished with bogeys to leave Schabacker one ahead.

"Today I just let it get away," said Eaton, who has never won an open-division state stroke or match play despite being one of Colorado's top amateurs for decades. "No. 10 was just unfortunate, but the iron I hit on the last hole was the deciding shot."

"I don't like to admit it, but I might be beginning to run out of gas. I don't know how many more times I will be in contention here, but I played pretty well today. I don't have any complaints as far as that goes."

"Indeed, there was only one better round than Eaton's Sunday, a 69 by Jim Brooks of Pueblo."

But Schabacker wasn't far off making two birdies and three bogeys in a steady performance.

With his victory, Schabacker became the third straight player from Cherry Hills Country Club to win the stroke play. Coincidentally, the player who started that streak in '85, Brandt Jobe, caddied for Schabacker Sunday.

"Brands helped me stay relaxed all day," said Schabacker, a 1984 graduate of Mullen. "I knew that I was good enough to win, but I still got nervous on the back nine. I was a little intimidated (by Longfellow and Eaton)."

SO CLOSE: Larry Eaton can hardly believe it as a long par putt on the 18th hole lips out of the cup Sunday.