Meeker golfer wins state title

By GARY BAINES
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DENUER. In the end, the best amateurs from the posh country club and public golf courses couldn't catch the guy from the 9-hole layout in Meeker.

Shawn McGeech is a greenskeeper from the Meeker course in northwestern Colorado, led from wire to wire to win the State Stroke Play tournament at the Ranch Country Club. His 1-under-par score of 70 Sunday - the best of the final round - left him at 4-under 280, four shots better than former University of Colorado golfer Mark Crabtree and 1989 State Match Play champ Kent Moore.

Crabtree was McGeech's closest challenger Sunday, but couldn't manage as much as a 72.

In the last four State Stroke Play tournaments, Crabtree has finished second, third and second. "That's kind of strange," he said. "I don't know what that means for next year. But I guess I can compare that to being second of everyone over the last four years."

One player who could come close to matching it is Moore, the Cherry Hills Country Club coach who won the Stroke Play in 1986, was 12th in '87, third in '88 and second this year. On Sunday, he closed with 71.

But really, no one made a run at the Meeker golfer. McGeech started the day with a two-stroke lead and by the time he finished nine holes, he was up by five. Crabtree narrowed the lead to three holes on the first tee as he rolled in a 12-foot birdie and McGeech 3-putted from 15 feet for his only bogey of the day. But after McGeech parred the next hole and Crabtree bogeyed, the Meeker golfer never fell less than a four-stroke edge the rest of the way.

"Shawn played very steady all day, but neither Tom (McGraw, who was also in the final group) or I put any pressure on him," said Crabtree. "We never really got an opportunity to see what Tom could do. Maybe it would have been different had someone been within one or two shots. But the biggest tribute you can pay to Shawn is that he led off to start. That isn't easy to do," McGeech agreed.

"The chances of that happening aren't very good," said the 25-year-old. "This is a strong field. It's hard to do."

It's even more surprising because a golfer few people had heard of, much less expected to win, had accomplished the feat. "Warren's biggest golf accomplishment coming into the Stroke Play was being the low amateur at the 1988 Rocky Mountain Open. "It's kind of surprising to win," he admitted. "But you've got to always think you're going to win."

Even with his big advantage down the stretch Sunday, McGeech wasn't exactly feeling secure.

"I sure didn't feel like a four-shot lead out there," he said. "But my target score was a 68 and I tried not to pay attention to what the other guys (in the group) were doing."

They weren't doing much, particularly at the start of the round. Crabtree and McGraw, McGeech's closest pursuers going into the final hole, each shot 43 and 4 over, respectively, on their way to tying for ninth place.

A 45 on the final hole for McGeech 2-putted from 60 feet out.

Another key point came at the par-5 12th. Both Crabtree and McGraw narrowly missed eagle putts on the green with tap-in birdies. But after McGeech rolled in a tough 2-foot for a birdie of his own to maintain his big lead.

"A bad break there, that was pretty much the tournament right there," said Crabtree.