

Armistead survives big blow to capture State Stroke title

By DAVE NELSON
Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

COLORADO SPRINGS — Three strokes behind with 12 holes to play was not the half of it.

As Mark Armistead stood on the eighth tee box at the Broadmoor South golf course early Thursday afternoon, a couple of far bigger numbers loomed over his head.

It took a full 60 minutes to play the first two holes. It had required nearly two hours to complete six holes.

As the wind began to blow and dark clouds surfaced like mushrooms over nearby Cheyenne Mountain, Armistead must have wondered if the State Stroke Play Championship was ever going to end.

"It was terrible. It seemed like an eternity," Armistead said nearly four hours later after finishing off a torturous round of 71 to claim his first major amateur title.

IT HAD REQUIRED nearly six hours for the leaders to complete the final round.

The frontrunners sat on their back side for what seemed like forever on nearly every tee box.

They were backed up and hacked off and half crazy by the time they reached the turn.

They played with the squirrels on the sixth tee box and then saw this squirrely tournament go completely crazy when CGA official Jim Topliff had to make four rulings on the final three holes alone.

"The only time I could really concentrate and think was when I was walking to my ball between shots," Armistead confessed.

Otherwise, it was a zoo and even the creatures sheltered in Cheyenne Mountain's famed animal houses right next door must have sensed it.

Armistead's round of 71 enabled him to post a 72-hole total of 288.

Meanwhile, third-round leader Warren Simmons carded a disastrous 77 and salvaged second place with a 72-hole total of 290.

Former professional Shawn Bellis of Aurora managed a 74 and finished third at 291.

Tom McGraw of Riverdale Golf Club was next at 293 following a round of 73.

SECOND-ROUND LEADER Todd Pyle of Loveland and Paul Brown of Grand Junction were tied at 295.

Brown equalled the low round of the day with a 2-under 70, while Pyle had it 2-under on the front nine but finished with a 76.

"I'm used to playing fast," Simmons said. "I

would just have loved to be in the first group today and got off to a good start. I don't mind it (the slow play) at the end but there was no pace at all out there today."

Armistead admitted the timing was bad, but his tempo was good and in the end that proved to be decisive.

"I've worked out a good pre-shot routine," Armistead explained. "I stand behind the shot, think about it for a second, look at it and then let it go."

Armistead was still two shots behind Simmons at the turn Thursday.

But he moved into a share of the lead when Simmons double-bogeyed the 10th hole and then moved to the top of the leader board when Simmons bogeyed the 11th hole.

Simmons then double-bogeyed the 12th and Armistead protected the lead down the stretch.

Simmons' difficulties began when he hooked his second shot on the par-5 10th hole into some deep weeds and required three shots to reach the green.

"I COULDN'T TAKE a drop because there was no place to drop it," Simmons said later. "There was nothing but jungle around me. Two club lengths (the distance he was allowed for the drop) gave me nothing but bush and rock."

It was a disaster from which the 45-year-old president of the Colorado Golf Association never recovered.

He also bogeyed the 11th and then double-bogeyed the 12th when he hooked his tee shot into the deep weeds and then had to pitch back on the fairway.

Meanwhile, Armistead avoided serious trouble until he reached the final hole where he drilled a 5-iron into a lateral hazard and took a bogey.

SIMMONS, WHO HAD taken a four-shot lead into the final round, refused to blame anyone but himself for his misfortune.

"Second place is a lot better than third or fourth or whatever," he observed. "Who knows, maybe I can win the next one."

The "next one" starts Friday when the first two rounds of the State Match Play Championship will be played at nearby Country Club of Colorado.

The low 32 shooters in the Stroke Play Championship advanced to the Match Play competition Thursday.

The quarterfinals and semifinals of the Match Play Championship will be played Saturday with the 36-hole title duel scheduled for Sunday.