

# Creamer poised for title shot

Michelle Wie is gone, off to prepare for her next LPGA event in Columbus, Ohio.

The 300-yard drives that made her a magnet for Kahkwa Club's galleries were absent Friday afternoon, replaced by a cold rain and a handful of contenders who, for all their talent, cannot match the curiosity Wie inspires every time she slides a tee into the ground.

From the mist emerged a new favorite with a pair of secret weapons in tow.

Paula Creamer, whose sense of style is matched only by her poise, has been here before.

She reached the semifinals of the 2003 Amateur before losing to Jane Park, who lurks across the bracket should the 18-year-old Creamer, a high school senior-to-be, get past Amanda McCurdy today.

But she possesses two things she lacked last season. A growing confidence in her short game. And her boyfriend on her bag.

We begin with the latter, the mention of which made the immaculately composed Creamer blush for the first and only time during Friday's post-match interview after her 3 and 2 victory over Diana Ramage.

Creamer's father caddied for her during last year's Amateur at Philadelphia Country Club.

Tarik Can, who will play golf for Texas this fall, has been at her side this week.

Can would have been back home in Florida on Friday, preparing to leave for college. But Hurricane Charley cancelled his flight.

So Creamer, three rounds away from securing her first Amateur title, was left to answer pressing questions like this: Which do you prefer, Paula, your Dad or your date?

"I get asked that a lot," she said, laughing. "I don't talk about that."

Did we mention poise?

On Friday, with Can as confidant, coach and calming influence, Creamer overcame some uneven iron play with the steeliness it will take to conquer Kahkwa this weekend.

Each time she missed a green, Creamer recovered with a flawless chip or a nervy stroke from her pink and powder blue putter.

"My short game saved me today," she said. "I could not figure out a way to get the ball to stay on the green."

Creamer broke out quickly against Ramage, taking a 2-up lead after eight holes. But the gritty Ramage, playing with an ace bandage to protect her injured left wrist and an insulin pump to control her diabetes, rallied to win the ninth.

Creamer went 2-up when Ramage missed the green with her approach at the par-4 10th, and seized control at the par-5 12th with a 90-yard, knockdown wedge to three inches.

She ground it out from there, saving herself with her putter at the 13th, 14th and 15th.

Can said Creamer's confidence around the greens "has been growing ever since the second round of stroke play."

"Her putting has gotten so much better," said Can, who also carried Creamer's bag at two LPGA events this summer, including the U.S. Women's Open. "She used to lag putts and have to concentrate very hard on trying to get it inside of six or eight feet. Now she's just automatic."

Friday's rain barely slowed Kahkwa's slick greens, ensuring that the weekend, as expected, will come down to a putting contest.

Creamer figures to be in the thick of it.

"I'm feeling really confident and very comfortable out here," she said. "I really like the golf course, especially when your short game is good. ... My speed control's been very good these last couple days."

Can has a flight out of Erie on Sunday. If Creamer reaches the 36-hole final, his travel plans will change again.

He will be there to advise, to steady her nerves, or as he did at one point Friday when her focus began to wander, to nudge her, gently, "let's stop goofing around. It's go time."

"He keeps me comfortable," Creamer said.

And that could make the rest of the field squirm.

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