

Hoffman shoots 61 for early lead at Travelers

Written by Nancy Spencer

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Associated Press

CROMWELL, Conn. — Charley Hoffman couldn't help but think about last year as he stood on the 17th tee Thursday at the Travelers Championship.

A year ago, Hoffman hit a similar tee shot right and into the water, staring at a double-bogey, bogey slide on the final two holes of the tournament in which he lost a 2-stroke lead and eventually the title.

This time, his drive stayed on the fairway. He finished with a par and then a birdie to complete a first-round 61, one shot off the course record.

"Believe it or not, I was thinking about it going down 16, 17, 18," he said. "If I could have just gotten those balls in play, I would have been defending champion here. But this year, I got off to a good start and obviously a little more focused on those last two holes. Hopefully, I'm there again this year."

His 28 on the back nine was the lowest nine holes on the PGA Tour this year and puts him one shot up on Hunter Mahan, who posted an early 62. Bubba Watson was two strokes back.

Hoffman felt he might have a chance to go even lower and was flirting with 59 after making eagle on 10 and 12, going to 8-under par with a birdie on 16.

"I knew I had some chances coming in," he added. "But when it's said and done, as I displayed last year, 16, 17 and 18 aren't an easy test. So I was just trying to make some pars coming in."

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Hoffman, Mahan and Watson all have interesting histories in Connecticut.

Mahan is the 2007 champion and has two second-place finishes in his 11 previous starts at the TPC River Highlands.

"I think this is the most comfortable course on Tour for me," he said.

He is also coming off a fourth-place finish after being in the final pair at the U.S. Open, something he noted has him playing with confidence. He opened the day by making the first of eight birdies during a bogey-free round. He was also at 8-under with three holes to play before shooting par on the final three holes.

"This is a golf course where you can be aggressive off the tee if you want to be but you can also play it safe," he added. "I choose to be mostly aggressive and it gives me some short irons. I'm happy to take on pins with my short irons. So it's a combo of things but all I know is when I step on that tee, I feel like I can hit any shot out here."

Watson finds himself in contention again after winning in 2010 and tying Hoffman as the runner-up a year ago. He said there is a reason so many familiar names are at the top of the leaderboard.

"These are guys that love this course, that love this tournament, they love Travelers and how they've treated us here," he explained. "And so, you're always going to see pretty much some of the same guys up there because they enjoy this area and this golf course."

Six golfers were four strokes back.

The biggest ovation of the day came when Justin Rose was introduced on the first tee as the

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U.S. Open champion. Rose went on to shoot a 67, leaving him in good shape heading into today.

“Obviously, I’m playing well,” he said. “I just knew I had to get through today without too much damage. If you manage to keep it in the mid-60s for most of the week, you should do pretty well.”

Rose also announced that he is changing management companies, leaving British-based 4Sports & Entertainment for Excel Sports, the same company that represents Tiger Woods.

“I just felt with me playing so much here in the States and where I felt my game was going, I just felt it was a decision I wanted to make,” he added.

The round marked the pro debut of Chris Williams, the top-ranked amateur in the world the past season. The former University of Washington star shot a 1-over 71, with two bogies and a single birdie.

“The first tee, I was a little nervous,” he said. “But then it was the same old, same old. I didn’t play very well, so that was pretty frustrating, but I got it out of the way.”

Park refreshed at NW Arkansas Championship

ROGERS, Ark. — Inbee Park took a week of rest and relaxation after her last tournament. She earned it.

The LPGA’s top-ranked golfer, who has turned the tour into a personal showcase of sorts this year, was last seen two weeks ago — walking away after a grueling 39-hole final day at the LPGA Championship.

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Park outlasted Catriona Matthew in a 3-hole playoff to win her second major championship of the year and secure her standing as the world's best player. The win was yet another reminder of just how far she has come in the last year, from 26th in the world rankings to six wins in her last 22 starts — including four victories this year.

Park will tee off today at the NW Arkansas Championship after a week in Florida with fellow South Korean Na Yeon Choi, a much-needed bit of rest after the difficult LPGA Championship win.

“Two weeks ago at the (LPGA Championship) was a very tough Sunday and I was really exhausted after the round,” Park explained. “I feel very refreshed now coming here this week after a week of break and I feel ready to go again.”

This week's tournament, in its sixth year as a tour stop, features 97 of the top 100 players on the money list — a standout field leading into next week's U.S. Open. Ai Miyazato won the event last year at Pinnacle Country Club, shooting a final-round 65 to overcome a 5-shot deficit for the second win of her career.

Park finished in a tie for 4th at the NW Arkansas Championship last year, beginning a stretch of 10 straight top-10 finishes. The run included a win at the Evian Masters, her first victory since the U.S. Open in 2008, and served as a precursor to a 2013 that has been nothing short of spectacular.

She opened the year with a win in Thailand before winning the second major of her career at the Nabisco Championship in early April. That moved Park ahead of Stacy Lewis and into the top spot in the rankings and she's taken control with two more wins and more than \$1.2 million in earnings this year.

“I feel more pressure than before, of course,” Park said. “I always thought that I was very fortunate to actually play for No. 1 every week and I think that's something very special and I think that's something that I really need to take positive. No. 1 is a tough spot but I've just got to try to enjoy it as much as I can.”

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Park will compete for the spotlight this week with local favorite Lewis, who played collegiately at nearby Arkansas.

Lewis, a Texas native, ascended to the top spot in the rankings following back-to-back wins earlier this year. She is still No. 2 and third on the money list with nearly \$750,000 in earnings but even she admitted that it's been difficult to concentrate on her own game while Park has left the field in her wake.

"You're definitely watching what she's doing because she's doing something special," Lewis said. "Inbee's played great this year. It's a little frustrating because I feel like I've played really well but it's gotten overshadowed quite a bit by what she's done. All you can do is take care of yourself and whatever happens from that, happens."

Lewis earned an unofficial win as an amateur at the NW Arkansas Championship in 2007, an event that was shortened to one round due to rain. Since then, she has struggled near her adopted home, finishing in an average of 23rd place.

Lewis' highest finish was eighth in 2009 but struggled to a 49th-place finish last year — a position she hopes to improve upon this week in front of her loyal following.

"It's my biggest event that I want to win, this side of a major," Lewis added. "I think the last few years, I definitely put a lot of pressure on myself that I really, really wanted to play well. I've learned from becoming No. 1 and over these last few months that you can't play that way ... I feel like I'm putting less pressure on myself this year."