Olson, 14, wins another championship

By Todd Phipers
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Leif Olson won the Colorado Junior Match Play Championship yesterday to add to the stroke-play title he captured last summer, and he's still about a month shy of his 15th birthday.

Olson's 2-and-1 victory over Andrew Atkinson of Montrose at Overland Golf Course gave him as many state victories as Hale Irwin and Mike Reid when they were growing up in the state, and two more than Steve Jones, who just happened to win the U.S. Open last weekend.

With four years of eligibility remaining as a junior, what does Olson do for an encore? "Just keep on trying, try my best," the modest Mullen High School sophomore-to-be said after closing out Atkinson with a matching birdie at the par-4 17th hole.

Here's one goal the Golden resident who plays out of Lakewood Country Club might keep in mind: About this time next year, he could become the first golfer to win back-to-back junior match-play crowns since Davis Love Jr. — the late father of Davis Love III — did it in 1983-84.

Olson jumped out to a 4-up lead on the first four holes of yesterday's finale, the result of his own steady play and a faltering start by Atkinson.

"When I first started off, I felt like I was holding onto the club too long with my right hand and I kept turning everything over," said the 18-year-old Montrose High School graduate, who will play at New Mexico State. "I missed three greens real bad.

Atkinson bounced back to win the fifth and sixth holes, and Olson's lead fluctuated between 2 and 3 up most of the rest of the way. "I started out good, but then he kind of got his game going," said Atkinson.

"I was trying to make it a respectable match after the start," Atkinson said, "and the first time I really kind of thought I had a chance was when I made a really good birdie on 14. Then when I hit a really good shot on 16 and Leif put it in the trap," he said of the tee shots at the 168-yard par-3, "it's pretty much favoring I don't win after that hole.

Olson put his bunker shot to a foot, however, and Atkinson missed a 15-footer for birdie that would have pulled him to one hole behind with two to play. "That was probably my best shot of the match," Olson said. "He had to win both holes to tie." But the runaway didn't lose hope when he halved the hole to go dormie.

"It wasn't over," Atkinson said. "I was 2 down with two to play) and the first match I played here, I was 3 down with three to go and I finished birdie, birdie, birdie, then birdied the first playoff hole to win. So I knew I could pull it out. But against Leif, it's a little different.

Atkinson made a remarkable birdie at the 17th, draining a long-distance putt after being forced to hit his second shot from out of a trap behind a tree. Olson, however, almost drove the green on the short par-4 and chipped to short range.

"I thought he might make it," said the winner, whose demeanor is as cool as his Nordic name would suggest. "I wasn't too upset, because I had a like a 5-footer uphill, and I knew I could make that."

He did, and the 1996 match-play title was in the books.

The Denver Post / John Leyba
Leif Olson lofted a chip shot onto the sixth green yesterday.