

Maxfield sizes up State Junior Match Play title

By DAVE NELSON

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FORT COLLINS — Ronnie Maxfield says he just sort of grew up with a golf club in his hands. And when you're only 5-3 and weigh somewhere in the neighborhood of 125 or 130 pounds, a golf club is a pretty good thing to grow up with.

"I used to play baseball and basketball," Maxfield said Thursday after winning the State Junior Match Play championship at the Fort Collins Country Club. "But everyone else just got too big for me. In golf, size doesn't matter."

Perhaps that was small consolation for 5-6, 125-pound Dave Altenbern, who had to settle for runnerup honors after pulling off a big rally that had squared the title match after 17 holes.

"Naturally, I'm disappointed," Altenbern said as he flicked a tear from his eye. The slender, tightly-wound Altenbern had faced up to a big challenge when he found himself three holes down with only six remaining. But the youngster from Fort Morgan regained his momentum when he won the 13th, 16th and 17th holes to square the match.

"I was just going to play for par on the last hole," Altenbern said. "Whatever he did . . . whatever."

Maxfield, admittedly a bit peeved after allowing his lead to disappear, unloaded a big drive on the final hole and two-putted from 30 feet for a par which won the match when Altenbern three-putted from the fringe.

"I was just thinking about hitting my drive down the fairway," Maxfield said of his strategy on the 18th. He left his birdie

putt two feet short after watching intently as Altenbern came up three feet short on the same line moments earlier. "I had a chance to study the break because Dave was outside of me," Maxfield said. "I didn't learn anything about the speed, though," Maxfield added. "I thought he just didn't hit it hard enough," he said as he tried to explain his weak birdie attempt.

Maxfield began playing golf at the age of 10 when he enrolled in group lessons at the Fort Collins municipal course, just a few miles down the road from the plush Fort Collins Country Club.

"I just hung around the course and played golf every day," Maxfield said. "I've been playing ever since."

Maxfield moved into the finals earlier Thursday when he dropped a 15-foot birdie putt on the 17th hole to score a 2 and 1 victory over George Andrews of Pueblo in the semifinals. Altenbern advanced to the finals with a 5 and 4 semifinal victory over Luke Maten of South Suburban Golf Club in Littleton.

Altenbern grabbed a brief 1-up lead when he won the fourth hole in the title duel, but Maxfield won four straight holes to take a 3-up lead. Altenbern caught traps on the fifth, sixth and eighth holes and also lost the seventh when Maxfield reached the 512-yard, par-5 hole with a drive and a 2-iron and two-putted for a birdie.

Altenbern was still 3-down when strong winds accompanied by light rains forced a 10-minute delay. When play resumed, Maxfield, driving straight into the teeth of the wind, hooked his tee shot into the trees on the 13th and Altenbern won the hole with a bogey to cut his deficit to two holes.

"I was just playing for a bogey," Altenbern explained. "From where he (Maxfield) was, I didn't think he could do any better than that."

Altenbern also won the 16th when Maxfield was blocked off from the green by several towering cottonwood trees, pitched short and took another bogey.

Maxfield caught a trap with his tee shot on the par-3 17th hole and took another bogey which enabled Altenbern to square the match when he chipped to within six inches of the cup for a tap-in par after missing the green with his tee shot.

Altenbern's father, Jim, is a vice president of the Colorado Golf Association and his mother, Marian, leases the golf shop at Bunker Hill Country Club in Brush.

"We decided to lease the golf shop to give our boys something to do and to keep them off the streets," Mrs. Altenbern explained.

The strategy apparently worked. The youngest of three sons, Altenbern started playing golf at the age of 8. And judging from his performance this week, he may well be playing competitive golf for years to come.

As for Maxfield, he just hopes to keep on maturing as a golfer and, hopefully, to keep on growing.

"I've grown a couple of inches the past year," he smiled. Even as he made that observation, Maxfield must have figured he proved one thing conclusively. He's certainly not the runt of the litter when it comes to playing the game he's grown up with.