

SPORTS



Travis Konecny

Road trip showed Flyers'

resolve and potential, 4c

USGA GOLF TOURNAMENT

Delaware girls finish second in USGA golf event

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THE NEWS JOURNAL

The rest of the players at the United States Golf Association Women's State Team championship probably weren't expecting much out of the team from Delaware.

The First State's best finish ever had been 32nd, in the event's first year in 1995.

But three high school golfers — Archmere sophomore Phoebe Brinker, Tower Hill sophomore

Jennifer Cleary and Charter of Wilmington junior Esther Park — combined to improve on that in a huge way.

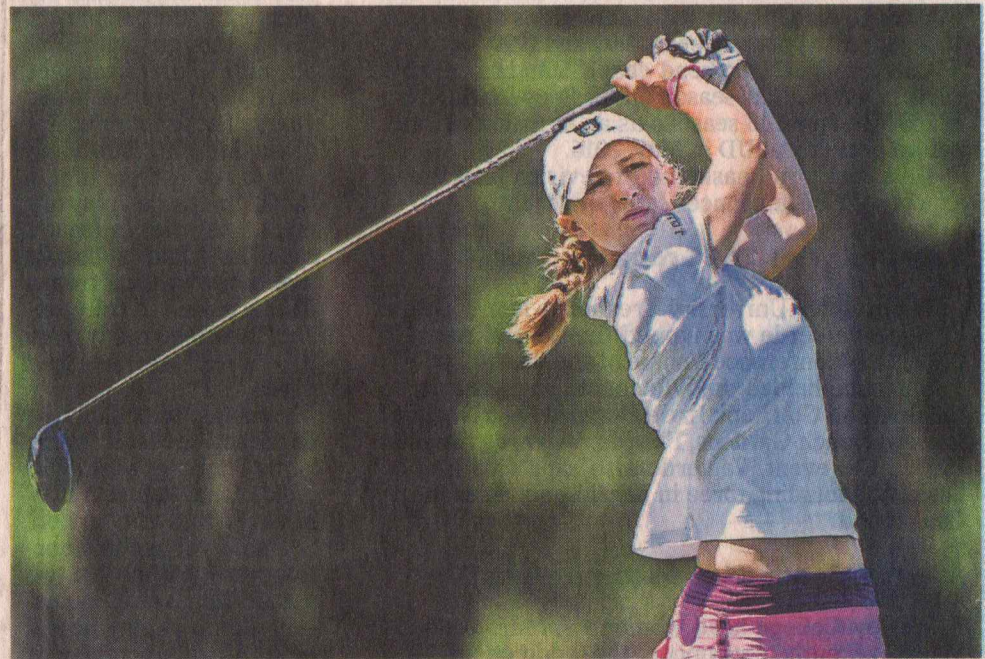
The trio went to The Club at Las Campanas in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Sept. 26-28 with a goal of placing in the top 22 after two rounds, to make the cut the final day. They wound up far exceeding everyone's expectations, as Brinker finished second individually and the threesome finished second as a team, just one

stroke behind the champions from Tennessee.

"It's kind of tough to look back on it and say that we lost by a shot," Brinker said. "But then you also have to think about all the long putts you made and all the shots you made up."

The USGA Women's State Team is played every two years, and brings together three-player teams from all 50 states and the District of Co-

See USGA, Page 4C



Tower Hill sophomore Jennifer Cleary shot a second-round 67 to help Delaware finish second in the USGA Women's State Team tournament. KYLE GRANTHAM/THE NEWS JOURNAL

Continued from Page 1

lumbia. The two lowest scores from each state in each round count as the team score.

Brinker opened with an even-par 72, and Park was off to a solid start at 2-over par through 15 holes of her opening round. But a tough finish forced the team to count Cleary's 80 as their second score the first day, leaving Delaware tied for 14th.

"That put us in pretty good position to make the cut, but nowhere really near the lead," Brinker said. "We knew we had a lot of ground to make up if we wanted to catch the leaders."

They vaulted into contention after two rounds, thanks to a huge day from Cleary. Brinker shot another 72, and Cleary put together a career-low, 5-under-par 67 for a 139 team total, the lowest of any state in the second round.

"I just kind of felt bad [after the first round]. I didn't really help the team," Cleary said. "I really came out the next day wanting to do it for Delaware and give a good score to the team."

The Delawareans were tied for the lead at a couple of points during the final round, before finishing just behind Tennessee. Brinker finished with a 68 for a three-day total of 4-under-par 212, two strokes behind individual champion Julia Potter of Indiana.

"With the USGA tournaments, you need that experience," Brinker said. "It's a completely different vibe. You're playing with women who are older than you. In our junior tournaments, you're just playing against kids your age. So it takes experience."

The threesome gained a lot from their trip to the previous USGA Women's State Team, in 2015 at Dalhousie Golf Club in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. They missed the cut there, but were by far the youngest team in the field. They were still the



Archmere sophomore Phoebe Brinker finished second individually and helped Delaware finish second as a team in the USGA Women's State Team tournament. KYLE GRANTHAM/THE NEWS JOURNAL

youngest team this year.

"Our physical games have come a long way," Cleary said. "When we were only 13, it was really hard to play that course because it was long for us."

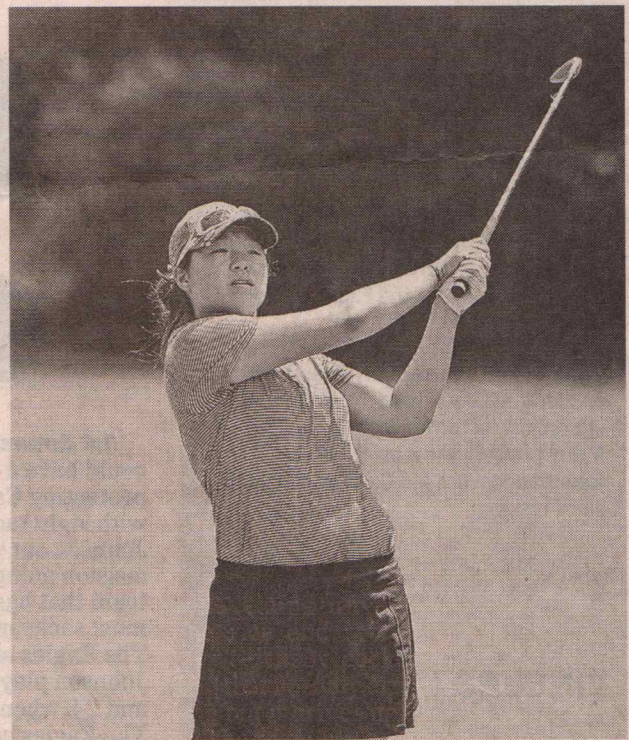
The courses are playing shorter and shorter for Brinker, Cleary, and Park, all of whom have already made a giant footprint in Delaware high school golf. Brinker won the individual title at the 2016 DIAA Golf Tournament as an eighth-grader at Rehoboth Beach Country Club.

Then in May, at Maple Dale Country Club in Dover, Park shot a final-round 67 and defeated Brinker on the second hole of a playoff to win the 2017 DIAA individual title. Cleary finished sixth and helped Tower Hill earn its second consecutive team championship.

But much of Cleary's fall season has been spent with the Hillers' undefeated field hockey team, so her golf game wasn't at its peak heading to New Mexico.

"I was a little rusty coming off of field hockey. I hadn't been playing much golf," Cleary said. "Phoebe and Esther had a lot of schoolwork to do, so they hadn't been practicing a whole lot, either."

They quickly shook the rust off, and almost brought home a USGA ti-



Charter of Wilmington junior Esther Park, the reigning DIAA individual champion, was part of the three-player Delaware team that finished second in the USGA Women's State Team tournament. JASON MINTO/THE NEWS JOURNAL

tle.

"This year, we definitely set some expectations for ourselves," Brinker said. "Making the cut was our main goal. We never expected this, but it was awesome."

Unfortunately, the USGA announced earlier this year that this would be the final Women's State Team tournament. Brinker, Cleary, and Park all would still be in high

school and eligible to make another title run in two years, but they made their mark in the event's last playing.

"I think it just kind of puts Delaware on the map," Cleary said. "People are starting to realize that we have something going on here."

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