

Bailey Squeezes into U.S. Open

By Gus Schrader
Gazette Sports Editor

Hold it! The glass slipper fits Cinderella after all.

And Al Bailey will have his dream come true despite incredible odds of playing in the U.S. Open next week at Chaska, Minn.

Bailey supplied the bizarre details of the story while back home in Cedar Rapids to play in the Waterloo Open this weekend. Then he'll head for Minnesota to practice Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday at the giant Hazeltine National Golf club course where the 70th U.S. Open begins Thursday.

Is he looking forward to it? You'll believe it when you learn Al has never ever SEEN a pro-tour golf event before.

Oh, Al has packed a lot of golf competition into his young life: College golf from Arkansas to Iowa U. . . . Winning The Gazette City Am in 1967 with an all-time record 276 score . . . reaching the quarterfinals of the U.S. Public Links in Pittsburgh . . . playing an exhibition with Julius Boros and George Bayer . . . an assistant pro's job for the last three years.

Even several small heart flare-ups and a wild playoff experience couldn't stop Al's trip to the Open.

He made the grade through the district qualifying in Chicago and was one of 139 seeking 35 Open berths in the sectional qualifying at Cog's Hill golf course in southwest Chicago last Tuesday. It was a

tough field. Even such pro-tour regulars as Doug Sanders, Marty Fleckman, Larry Hinson and Dave Stockton failed to survive.

Steve Spray, who plays out of Cedar Rapids, barely made the Open with a 146 for 18 holes. But Jack Rule, who also plays out of C.R., missed it. Rule, Bailey, Gay Brewer, Jack Fleck and 13 others shot 147 and held a playoff to see who would get the five remaining spots.

"I knew I had a chance on the second 18 after shooting a 75 the first time," Bailey said. "However, this heart ailment I've had since I was a kid began to kick up.

"It does that occasionally when I'm exerting myself hard or when I got overly excited, I guess. I had several long spells when I was in high school. Once when I was playing basketball they had to take me to the hospital and give me digitalis. That's why I couldn't play high school sports.

"But the doctors apparently figure there isn't much chance of my dying, so they let me play golf. I've had times — like when I was playing golf in college — when I had to drop out because of one of the attacks.

"Well, I had one of these spells Tuesday when I bent over a putt on the 13th green. I got real dizzy and felt my heart pounding wildly. I told the other players in my group and they had me lay down by the green for about five minutes. Fortuna-

tely the foursome behind us was slow in coming up or I guess I'd had to forfeit."

With three holes to go in the 36-hole playoff, Bailey was five over par. He got word at that point it would take four over par to make the field.

"I knew I'd have to birdie one of the last three holes," he recalled, "and I got that bird on No. 16. I figured all I had to do was par the last two holes, and I managed a par on No. 17, a tough hole, 330 yards against the wind.

"So all I needed was a par on No. 18, a 220-yard par-three against the wind. But just before I teed off, an official came by in a cart and said it looked as if I would need three over par to tie for the last playoff spots.

"Now I knew I needed a birdie. Well, I pulled my two-iron shot to the left. I had a tough chip shot back to a sloping green. Darned if I didn't chip it in for the birdie and I made the playoff!"

A "sudden-death playoff" is a bad name for a golfer worrying about a bad heart, but Al stuck grimly by it through the first four holes. That made 40 holes of golf that day. Then it became too dark to continue.

Everything had been decided except the last spot in the U. S. Open, and he and Randy Wolff of Beaumont, Texas, were still tied. Officials ordered them to return the next morning to resume the playoff.

"It's an hour's drive from Sunset Ridge to Cog's Hill," Bailey said, "but I went home



Al Bailey

that night and was there again the next morning. On the first hole we played — a par-five — Wolff got a birdie-four and made the field, while I was the first alternate.

"What a deal. I drove an hour each way to play one hole of golf and had missed it. But my head pro at Sunset Ridge, Bob Harris, told me I had a good chance. He said he had been first alternate twice in previous years and had made the Open both times when someone had to drop out."

Bailey's big moment came Thursday morning. A U.S. Open official called him and told him Fleck, the former Iowan who won the 1955 Open in a playoff over Ben Hogan, was ill and decided not to play at Hazeltine next week.

"I stood there by the phone and cried," Bailey said. "I was so happy and I couldn't believe I really was in the U.S. Open. Then I called my wife to tell her and I bawled some more.

"It seemed like a dream that I'd made it after all that trouble. I don't think it would have affected me nearly as much if I had made it in a normal way."

So Al cranked up the engine and drove to Cedar Rapids. He stayed at the home of his parents, Mr. and Mrs. J. L. Bailey, 1137 Ninth street N.E., playing in the Waterloo Open this weekend.

"People think it's a miracle when I tell them I've even seen a pro-tour golf tournament before," Bailey said. "I've had chances to go to the U.S. Open but something always happened. My job as assistant pro kept me busy, and I'm grateful to my boss, Bob Harris, for giving me a week off during our busy season to make this try."

Bailey said it was a thrill to play with Jack Fleck, Doug Sanders, Dave Stockton and the other pros in the Chicago qualifying round.

"On one par-three hole," he said, "the other golfers hit six-irons, but I could make it with a seven-iron. I did. When I got up to the clubhouse, Bob Harris (former M.C. champ) asked me what I'd hit. Imagine that! Gay Brewer was asking Al Bailey what club he'd hit!"

He'd better get used to the company of celebrities. Arnie Palmer, Nicklaus, Gary Player, Casper and most of the other pros will be rubbing salt in the wound with him at Hazeltine next week.

No, Bailey doesn't even have any dreams of "pulling a Jack Fleck" in the Open. He merely hopes he can play respectable golf and make a hole cut.

OPEN---
Continued from Page One
water on the fourth hole, took a double bogey and was sure I was dead. But Randy Wolff (of Beaumont, Tex.) also had some problems, double-bogeyed the same hole, and the two of us had to go one more

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TO PROTECT YOUR
PICNIC TABLE OR FOOD
BOX FROM ANTS, SET LEGS
IN TIN CANS FULL OF
WATER

about half of them would have beaten my score."

Bailey has no illusions about causing any big stir this weekend when he moves into the company of Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player, Billy Casper, Lee Trevino, Arnold Palmer and all the other

Al Bailey, the former Cedar Rapids resident who got into the Open when former Iowan Jack Fleck withdrew, shot a 41-40-81.

Tough Course

I never hit the ball much better, which sounds silly when you shoot an 81," said Bailey, an assistant pro at Sunset