

# Curtis completes Hollywood dream ending

## Rookie golfer from Ostrander flies past greatest in the world to win British Open

By MICHAEL L. MOORE  
Assistant Managing Editor

It's the stuff from which movies are made. Our hero, young and good looking, is in the hunt at golf's oldest championship yet no one gives him a chance to win. But as all the other stars fall away, there he is, standing with the Claret jug hoisted above his head as the credits roll.

That's the story of Ben Curtis, British Open champion.

Curtis, a PGA Tour rookie playing in his first major championship, was the last man standing at the 132nd Open on Sunday.

Curtis took on the giants of his sport at one of the most revered championships in all of golf, coming away as the most unlikely of winners. The native son of tiny Ostrander played big in becoming the only player to finish under par. It was a history-making victory that made Curtis an instant millionaire and will change his life forever.

Chased by an all-star cast of previous major championship winners in Tiger Woods, Vijay Singh and Davis Love III, Curtis survived three bogeys over his final five holes to secure a one-shot victory over Singh and Thomas Bjorn. Woods and Love finished another shot back.

"Oh, man, that's about all I can say now," Curtis said after the momentous final round. "I came in here this week just trying to play the best I could and hopefully make the cut ... And obviously I did that and went out there and probably played the best weekend of my life."

Starting Sunday in a tie for third, Curtis blazed into the lead on the front nine at Royal St. George's Golf Club, carding a 4-under par 32. He birdied the 9th, 10th and 11th holes to get to 6-under for the tournament and a two-shot lead.

"I knew (Saturday) afternoon that once I got



Ben Curtis has a tight grip on the Claret jug while sitting on a greenside bunker on the 18th hole.

going on the back nine I had a chance of winning," Curtis said. "(On Sunday) I just got off to a better start and got ahead. I was playing hard coming in. I was trying to keep the course in front of me and I maybe played too cautious ... Instead of worrying about it, I should have went out there and fired at the flags like I had been all week."

What lay ahead was the back nine, which had been the toughest stretch of holes all week. Curtis bogeyed the 12th, 14th, 15th and 17th holes before snaking in a critical 10-foot par putt on the 18th. The finish put him in the clubhouse at 1-under, trailing Bjorn by two shots. Curtis made nothing worse than a bogey all week.

And then the unthinkable happened to Bjorn. Bjorn drove into a greenside bunker on No. 16 and took three shots to get out of it. The double bogey put him in a tie with Curtis with two holes to play. Just as Curtis was hitting shots on the practice range in preparation for a possible playoff, Bjorn bogeyed the 17th to fall a shot behind. Bjorn made par at 18 to give Curtis a one-shot victory.

Curtis, who came in as the 396th ranked player in the world, said the reality of his accomplishment probably won't sink in for some time. He was a 500 to 1 shot to win the Open, according to the British oddsmakers.

"Right now, I was just in a zone and very focused on what I was doing," Curtis said. "I didn't really think about winning until afterwards ... I just can't describe how I feel right now. I just wish

that my family was here to be with me."

The victory, which earned him \$1.2 million and a five-year exemption in all of the major championships, is an accomplishment that not many people thought possible for the 26-year-old graduate of Buckeye Valley High School. The talking heads from the Golf Channel wondered Saturday night whether Curtis, who had never finished better than a tie for 13th in his young career, stood a chance at winning.

Before the final round, one of England's oldest newspapers, the *London Observer*, didn't give young Curtis much of a chance.

"Nice young man. Clearly a decent player, but surely this is too early for him to win an Open," the *Observer* wrote Saturday night.

Could Curtis be another Cinderella story much like Hilary Lunke, a journeyman pro who won the United States Women's Open for her first victory earlier this month?

That question was answered in the affirmative early Sunday as Curtis became the first player since 1913 to win a major championship on his first try. The great Francis Ouimet was the last.

"I'm in great company and I feel like I don't belong right now," Curtis said. "But I knew in my mind that I did. Right now, many people are probably saying 'he doesn't really belong there.' But I know I do so, that's all that matters."

A month ago, the British Open was a distant dream for Curtis. He was in the midst of a struggle

with a balky putter that abandoned him during the Memorial Tournament at Muirfield Village Golf Club and the Kemper Open in Potomac, Md. He missed the cut at both tournaments.

Curtis had committed to play in the Tour's B.C. Open this week, like many players looking for a chance to compete while the world's best golfers were a half a world away.

"I wasn't going to come and even try to qualify (for the British)," Curtis said Saturday. "I was just going to stay over (in the states) on tour and work on my game."

Curtis' epiphany came in the weeks leading up to the Western Open, when he paid a visit to his college coach at Kent State University.

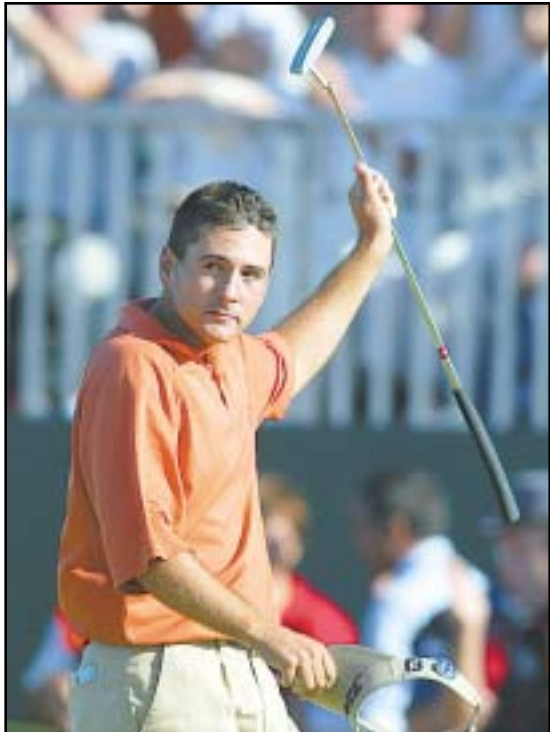
"I went over to coach (Herb) Page and said 'I need fixed,'" Curtis said. "I've never putted that bad in my life, but we got it fixed."

With a newfound resolve, the 26-year-old who in 2000 was the top-ranked amateur in the world put it all together for four rounds at the Western. He tied for 13th to qualify for the Open.

The rest is history. After shooting a 1-under 70 to stay in the hunt on Saturday, Curtis said all he wanted was a chance.

"Being in contention at a major championship, that's what it's all about," he said. "... I have been playing a lot better the last three weeks and this kind of golf suits me the best. It's not going to take

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Ben Curtis acknowledges the crowd after making his par putt on the 18th.



Ben Curtis' parents, Bob and Janice, react after finding out their son had just won the 132nd British Open.

## Curtis' family, friends erupt with pride

By MICHAEL L. MOORE  
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You could feel the electricity in the air at Mill Creek Golf Club in Ostrander early Sunday morning.

As Ben Curtis made his way through the final nine in the 132nd British Open, his friends and family flocked to the course where the PGA Tour rookie learned the game under the tutelage of his grandfather, the late Bill "Blackie" Black.

"All week I've just been watching and hoping," said Jason Hopper, a childhood friend of Curtis' who has traveled to several tournaments this year. "I was watching (on Saturday) and when they interviewed him on TV you could just see the confidence on his face."

The 100 or so people in the clubhouse erupted with applause when Thomas Bjorn made a bogey on the 17th hole Sunday, putting Curtis one shot ahead as the tournament wound down a world away.

"We don't normally root against people, but we sure have been today," said Ben's dad, Bob Curtis.

Bjorn's misfortune opened the door for Curtis, who walked right in to become the first golfer in nearly 100 years to win his first major on his first try. More than a few tears were shed at Mill Creek, a public golf course where a soft-spoken kid from a tight-knit family learned the game just a few feet from his back door.

"After the front nine (on Sunday) I said 'somebody better pinch him and wake him up,'" Bob Curtis said. "I always knew he was calm but I said 'man, he's got ice water in his veins.'"

Curtis entered Sunday's final round in a tie for third. All around him on the leader board were names such as Tiger Woods, Vijay Singh and Davis Love III, all major championship winners.

"I talked to (Ben) last night and I told him 'we don't care if you shoot 80. We're still going to be very proud of you.'" Bob Curtis said. "(Ben) said, 'I think I can do a little better than that.'"

Ben's grandmother, Myrtie Black, displays the same even-keel demeanor as her grandson. She wears a smile on her face and offers a pat on the back to anyone who passes through Mill Creek's clubhouse, which doubles as a shrine for all things Ben. It was Myrtie and Bill Black who opened Mill Creek in 1973 and turned young Ben loose on its manicured fairways.

"We were just talking about this the other day, about him having a chance to win," said Myrtie Black. "I couldn't fathom it."

As Ben grinded his way through the final six holes on Sunday, Bob Curtis could see the pressure manifesting itself in his son's swing.

"When you get into that situation, you want to hold onto that club a little longer than normal," he said. "He's normal. It's in your body

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