

Winning title was never expected

By LUCAS SULLIVAN
Sports Writer

On Sunday morning, Bob Curtis went about his usual routine mowing the greens at Mill Creek Golf Club.

By the afternoon, he was the father of the 2003 British Open champion, Ben Curtis.

"It's unbelievable right now," said Bob Curtis, the course's superintendent. "He has done something very special and it really hasn't sunk in."

Ernest Hemingway couldn't

have written a better story. All the Cinderella stories couldn't have produced a better ball than the one that unfolded Sunday at Royal St. George's.

A PGA Tour rookie from a town no bigger than that of Sandwich, England, the site of this year's 132nd Open Championship, plays 72 holes at 1-under par, holding off players Tiger Woods, Vijay Singh and Thomas Bjorn to win golf's most prestigious tournament.

"I've won in the past, just not

at this level," a humble Ben Curtis said. "I was shaking in my boots, obviously, but I was just out there very focused on what I had to do and let my work speak for itself."

But out at the Curtis family golf course in Ostrander, there were enough nerves to go around. Bob found himself walking out of the packed clubhouse to get a grip on what was happening.

His boy was atop the leaderboard at the British Open — the BRITISH OPEN!

Throughout the day, family and fans started to show up at Mill Creek to feel a part of the biggest thing to happen in the history of sports in Delaware County.

"It's just hard to realize what has just happened," said Myrtle Black, Ben's grandmother. "He has done something that most people never thought he could do."

But that has been the Curtis family ideology since his grandfather, Bill "Blackie" Black, purchased 63 acres to build a golf course that everyone could afford to play.

In 1972, Black constructed the first nine holes. By 1975 another nine and a clubhouse were added after play became too heavy for the nine-hole course.

As the story goes, back in 1983 when Ben was about 6 years old, Black put a golf club in the youngster's hands and taught him the game of golf.

"I grew up living right off the 18th (green) for 12 years," Ben said. "I grew up with the game around me. It's a very nice golf course, but it's not a championship style golf course."

Ben played the course for the next 12 years. After graduating from Buckeye Valley in 1996, he was awarded a golf scholarship to Kent State University. There he earned All-American honors in 2000 and captured three Ohio Amateur championships by the time he graduated.

Fast forward to 2003. Ben



Gazette file photos

Above: Bill Black, center, talks golf with his two young grandsons, Nick Curtis and Ben Curtis, right. Below: Ben Curtis stands in front of the scorer's tent with a trophy for winning the 2000 Ohio Amateur.



Gazette file/Matt Emmons

A senior at Buckeye Valley in October 1995, Ben Curtis tees off during the state golf tournament.

followed up an invitation to the Memorial Tournament, where he missed the cut, by qualifying for the Open Championship with a 13th-place finish at the 100th Western Open two weeks ago.

The finish was Curtis' best on tour before Sunday's phenomenal round that left him as the only player to finish in red figures.

But his biggest accomplishment might have been being able to show his grandfather his PGA card before Black died in February.

"He was with him today," Myrtle Black said of her late husband. "He had a lot of people praying for him and wanting him to just do his best."

Curtis saved his best for last. "(Sunday) I just got off to a better start and got ahead," Curtis said. "I was playing hard coming in."

As this reporter saw Curtis' family Sunday, watching a third-generation golfer win golf's biggest trophy in a place built out of love for the game, it seemed they all had played hard coming in.

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Ben Curtis: At a glance

The road to Ben Curtis' British Open championship:

May 26, 1977 — Bob and Janice Curtis gave birth to their second son, Ben.

Spring 1983 — Curtis' grandfather, Bill Black, introduces him to the game of golf at the age of 6.

Oct. 1992 — Curtis wins the Central District title as a freshman at Buckeye Valley High School.

June 1996 — Curtis graduates from Buckeye Valley with three district titles, two consecutive state titles and a scholarship to play golf at Kent State University.

June 1997 — Curtis competes in his first Nationwide Tour event, missing the cut at the Nike Cleveland Open.

1999 — Curtis wins his first of two Ohio Amateur championships.

Spring 2000 — Curtis graduates from Kent

State University and immediately turns pro.

2000-2001 — Curtis plays on the Hooters Tour.

Oct. 2000 — Curtis competes in his first PGA event, missing the cut at the Buick Challenge.

Dec. 2002 — Curtis earns his PGA Tour card after finishing in a tie for 26th in qualifying.

Feb. 2003 — Black dies while the family is constructing a new clubhouse at Mill Creek.

May 2003 — Curtis finds out he has been given an exemption to play in the Memorial Tournament, where he misses the cut.

July 2003 — Finishes in a tie for 13th at the Western Open to qualify for the British Open.

July 12 — Curtis and his fiancé, Candace Beatty, depart from Cleveland, bound for Sandwich, England.

July 20 — Curtis shoots 4-under on the front nine in the final round of the British Open to win the 132nd championship.

REACTION

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and you can't do anything about it. Somewhere along the line, I thought he was going to feel it."

Ben's mother, Janice, watched the telecast with eager anticipation, alternately clutching her hands against her chest and giving out hugs. When the dust cleared and Ben was declared the winner, Janice let her emotions flow.

"I really can't describe the feelings right now," she said. "It will sink in sometime, maybe months from now."

Bob Curtis said the ending was a fairy tale that he never expected to come true.

"You dreamed about him

being there, but you really couldn't expect him to win," Bob Curtis said. "If you would've told me Monday or Tuesday that this was possible, I would've thought everyone had lost their mind."

And now that he has proved all the doubters wrong and taken home the Claret jug?

"His life will change a lot," Bob Curtis said. "He just has to go along with that and get the most he can out of it."

Adam Ellison, another childhood friend of Ben's, planned to meet Ben at the airport in Cleveland upon his return today. Ellison said he couldn't wait to be the first one to greet the new British Open champion.

"We're going to go crazy," Ellison said. "Just yell and scream and give him the biggest hug in the world."

"It couldn't have happened to a nicer person. He's just a great guy who's great at what he does. I'm on cloud nine right now."

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MAJOR

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10, 15, or 20 under par to win. If you stay around par, you're going to be right in the hunt."

Stuff of the movies? Curtis himself couldn't have written a better script.

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FINAL ROUND

Hole	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Out	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	Final
PAR	4	4	3	5	4	3	5	4	4	36	4	3	4	4	5	4	3	4	4	71
Score	3	4	3	4	4	3	4	4	3	32	3	2	5	4	6	5	3	5	4	69

THIRD ROUND

Hole	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Out	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	Final
PAR	4	4	3	5	4	3	5	4	4	36	4	3	4	4	5	4	3	4	4	71
Score	5	4	3	5	4	4	4	4	5	38	3	3	4	4	5	3	3	3	4	70

SECOND ROUND

Hole	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Out	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	Final
PAR	4	4	3	5	4	3	5	4	4	36	4	3	4	4	5	4	3	4	4	71
Score	4	4	3	5	4	2	5	5	4	36	3	3	4	5	5	5	3	4	4	72

FIRST ROUND

Hole	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Out	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	Final
PAR	4	4	3	5	4	3	5	4	4	36	4	3	4	4	5	4	3	4	4	71
Score	4	4	3	4	5	3	4	5	5	37	4	3	4	4	5	4	3	4	4	72