

PLAYER OF THE YEAR

by Gene Cooney

Twenty-three-year-old Ralph Howe, III, of West Sayville, New York, drove eight hours to watch a practice round at the 1988 Masters last spring and had a dream that has probably occurred to everyone who has ever seen the Augusta National Golf Course. "Boy, I'd really like to play in The Masters someday."

Now most of us are able to suffer such flights of folly silently. But Howe, who had recently finished an All-American season playing the number one position on the Florida Southern golf team, believed his aim was realistic. "I figured I would have an easier time making the field as an amateur than as a pro, so I told my mom that earning a spot in The Masters was my goal for the year."

Still, it's one thing to aim high and quite another to *reach* that high goal. But Ralph Howe is different. He knows that MGA Player of the Year Awards, national championships and invitations to The Masters do not come easily. They come only to the determined.

Mike Wands, professional at Middle Island in Middle Island, L.I., where Ralph grew up, recalls, "Many days I would arrive at the course at the crack of dawn and find Ralph on the practice tee, and see him there when it was time to lock up at the end of the day." Wands and Ralph's father, a fine player himself, were largely responsible for getting the young lefty started with solid fundamentals and good work habits, but it was Ralph's determination that set him apart.

Mike Hebron, a Master Profes-



A triumphant Howe with his Public Links Trophy.

sional at Smithtown Landing, who has also worked with Ralph, says, "He is extremely coachable, he listens, asks questions and is a dedicated and goal-oriented young man."

Despite the lofty goals and all the hard work, Howe admits he wasn't entirely sure of himself until the opening round of the British Amateur. "I can tell you exactly when it happened. It was the first match, and I was on the 12th hole at Royal Porthcawl. The wind was blowing and the weather was awful. With seven holes left to play I was five holes down and I went on to birdie five of the next seven to win the

match on the final hole. That gave me the confidence I needed to believe that I could play at that level." He went on to the quarter-finals, the highest American finish.

The British Amateur was the start of a campaign which swept Howe to the top of the amateur standings in the Met Area in record-breaking fashion. Following the British Amateur, he returned to play in the MGA's IKE Championship at the famous Garden City Golf Club where he continued his fine play. He led the 54-hole tournament most of the way until a three-putt on the final green opened the door for Bob Byrnes of the Powelton Club, whose

LARRY PETRILLO

HIS PITCHING WEDGE WILL BE DISPLAYED BESIDE BOBBY JONES' "CALAMITY JANE" PUTTER AND BEN HOGAN'S ONE-IRON.

final round 68 tied the course record and captured the title. But Howe was not discouraged after this tough loss. His dad, who is Ralph's most loyal fan, said simply, "He'll have other chances." Other chances, indeed. Ralph's next big event was the U.S. Public Links.

Having failed to win the British Amateur, Howe's path to the Masters was now down to two options. He either had to get to the final round of the U.S. Amateur or win the U.S. Amateur Public Links Championship outright. In July, beneath the Grand Tetons in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Howe got down to work.

The road to the finals in a major match play tournament is never easy, but Howe smoothed the way by playing every match better than par, save one, where he finished at even par. It wasn't until the semi-finals that he was stretched to the 18th hole.

The final match was a classic, pitting Howe against the defending champion, Kevin Johnson. Johnson was on a hot streak, having won his second successive Massachusetts Amateur Championship the week before arriving in Jackson Hole. But Howe was ready.



Howe lost the lead temporarily when an errant drive landed in a creek bed.

1988 HONOR ROLL

Ralph Howe, III , <i>Middle Island</i>	938 pts.
George Zahringer, III , <i>Deepdale</i>	550 pts.
James McGovern , <i>Hackensack</i>	525 pts.
Jeff Thomas , <i>Plainfield West</i>	480 pts.
Bob Housen , <i>Manasquan River</i>	445 pts.
Tom Yellin , <i>Stanwich</i>	445 pts.
P.J. Cowan , <i>Pine Hills</i>	385 pts.
Ronnie Springer , <i>Brae Burn</i>	283 pts.
John Baldwin , <i>Meadow Brook</i>	278 pts.
Robert Byrnes , <i>Powelton</i>	275 pts.
Allan Small , <i>Fairmount</i>	275 pts.
John Karcher , <i>Wee Burn</i>	275 pts.

The morning round featured nearly flawless golf by both men. On the 11th hole, Howe hit the shot that may have earned him his victory. Howe, a lefty, had pulled his drive to the right rough where a stand of cottonwood trees blocked his line of sight. He pulled out his two-iron and faded a magnificent shot to the edge of the green. His putt for birdie halved the hole, preserving his lead at 2-up, which is how he finished the morning session.

In the afternoon, Howe surrendered the lead when his drive on the 11th hole found a creek bed and the bogey he salvaged was no match for Johnson's birdie. Both men played the 12th through 17th at even par and Howe needed a birdie at the 18th to force an extra hole. He had played the 18th twice in match play and birdied it each time. All he needed was one more—and he got it. On the first extra hole, both men drove well but Howe put his approach shot on the back fringe, 25 downhill, twisting feet above the hole. Johnson was only 10 feet away. Howe told his caddie to pull the flag and calmly chipped in for a birdie. Johnson's attempt at birdie rolled past the cup and Howe was the new Public Links champion.

With the victory, Howe not only became the first male golfer from the Met Area to capture a national title since Mike Cestone won

the U.S. Senior Amateur in 1960, but also earned the distinction of being the first left-hander ever to win a USGA National Championship. As such, he donated his pitching wedge, which figured so prominently in his victory, to the USGA and it will be displayed beside Bobby Jones' "Calamity Jane" putter and Ben Hogan's one-iron.

Howe's achievement in the U.S. Amateur Public Links, along with his showing in The IKE, the British Amateur, a runner-up finish in the N.Y. State Amateur and a season-ending victory in the Mid-Atlantic Amateur, clinched the MGA Amateur Player of the Year title. His record-setting 938 points easily outdistanced six-time Player of the Year, George Zahringer of Deepdale, who finished in second place. Jim McGovern of Hackensack, who captured third position in the standings, closed out his amateur career with a smashing victory in the Met Amateur at Plainfield.

For Howe, there was one thing even more important than winning a national championship or a Player of the Year Award, and that was his cherished invitation to The Masters. "It's like a dream come true," Howe said. "I grew up with The Masters and I'm going there to play well, I'm not going there to watch."

Immediately after the green jacket is conferred on the winner, Howe will probably turn professional and prepare for the PGA Tour qualifying school next October. As for his future, he believes, "I've got a lot of good golf ahead of me." Knowing Ralph Howe, III, no one should be surprised by how good that golf might be. □

Gene Cooney is a freelance writer based in Norwalk, Connecticut. He specializes in stories about golf personalities and golf travel—and he fits in 18 holes whenever he can.