

Halla to join Cantlay, Uihlein at U.S. Amateur

month as amateur stars Patrick Cantlay and Peter Uihlein play in a week, Halla earned his first U.S. Amateur berth by claiming the third and final qualifying spot at Milwaukee Country Club last week.

His accomplishment reverberated throughout the golf community in southeastern Wisconsin, because Halla is the kind of guy everybody likes. He has somehow managed to play tournament golf at a

high level and run a busy municipal golf course without making a single enemy, no small feat.

The Waukesha County employee just might have the biggest gallery at the U.S. Amateur despite the presence of Cantlay, Uihlein, Tom Lewis and others who seem destined for success on the professional tours.

"The response has been overwhelming," Halla said. "Being involved with Waukesha County for 20 years, you certainly meet a lot of people. If everybody shows up to watch who says they're coming, there's going to be a nice crowd out there."

Halla has compiled a good record over the years. He's competed in eight United States Golf Association championships, including the U.S. Amateur Public Links five times. In fact, he runs the public qualifier in Wisconsin, which also makes him probably the only USGA volunteer in the U.S. Amateur field.

He has won some tournaments, but the biggest prizes have eluded him.

"I'm a nine-time runner-up in state championships," he said. "My best finish in the State Am is third, but I've been runner-up in just about every other one."

"I've had a victory here or there, but I seem to be a two-round golfer. That's why I'm working for a living, right?"

Halla has to fit tournament golf into his work schedule at Naga-Waukee. Sometimes, that means opening the course, hurrying to his tee time at a State Open or State Amateur, and returning at night to close the place. He tries to hit a few balls every day, even if it's after sunset.

"Waukesha County has just been great about it," he said. "I tend not to play in events that would keep me away from work for more than one day."

But what if the State Amateur is held in Eau Claire or La Crosse?

"Then I won't play," Halla said. "I've missed some big ones because of that. But there's no shortage of great amateur golf in Wisconsin. We are really privileged in this state to have a lot of great organized golf."

At Erin Hills, he'll compete against the likes of Cantlay, the college player of the year at UCLA and the top-ranked amateur in the world; Uihlein, the defending champion who played in three major championships this year; Lewis, who turned heads by contending at the British Open; and Nationwide Tour winners Russell Henley and Harris English.

But it's not inconceivable that Halla would get through 36-hole stroke play qualifying at Blue Mound Golf & Country Club in Wauwatosa and Erin Hills and emerge from the field of 312 with one of 64 coveted spots in match play.

"Match play, that's a different game," Halla said. "I don't have to shoot 16-under par. If I make it to match play, all I've got to be is a little better than the guy I'm playing."

"Obviously, I would love to get a match and go head-to-head against some of the best amateurs in the world."

Whether or not he makes the cut, Halla plans to enjoy the experience.

"Oh, absolutely," he said. "I love to play more than I love to win. I just love to play golf."

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