

Baylor golfer leads Williams' 67 tops Cotton States field

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By Keith Prince

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Baylor sophomore Wesley Williams fired an impressive 5-under-par 67 to lead 27 golfers who shot under par in Wednesday's first day of qualifying for the 54th annual W.E. Cole Cotton States Invitational.

Playing at the Bayou DeSiard Country Club Course, 129 golfers will go at it again today trying to gain one of 64 slots into the match play format that begins Friday.

As it stands going into today's round, 62 golfers are at 74 or better and another 13 are at 75 — meaning those 13 would play off for two slots if it were a one-day qualifying test.

"It looks like something around 4-over-par (148) would probably stand a pretty good chance of getting in if Thursday's scores are like today," tournament official John Luffey said after Wednesday's round.

Australian Heath D'Altera and University of Arkansas golfer Barrett Lais shared second place Wednesday at 68 while a pair of local golfers were among eight who posted 3-under 69.

ULM junior Daniel Keeton of West Monroe and Louisiana Tech junior Preston Smith of Monroe both had solid 69s.

Keeton made five birdies against two bogeys and said, "I drove the ball well and putted pretty well. I felt like I stayed in control most of the day and never felt much pressure."

Smith, who has been battling a shoulder injury for nearly a year, had a bogey-free round "because I hit the ball straight all day. But I didn't make any putts. That will be the goal tomorrow."

Another Monroe product, LSU graduate Brandon Aydlett, also had an impressive 2-under 70 — especially after his 3-wood broke on the practice range just before his starting time.

"I immediately hit my driver in the bayou on No. 1 for double bogey, so I guess it took me a little while to get over the 3-wood," he said with a laugh.



News-Star file photo

Preston Smith shot a 69 Wednesday in the first round of the W.E. Cole Cotton States Invitational in Monroe.

"But I just tried to keep going and I eventually played pretty well," he said of his 37-33 round that included birdies on 3-6-11-15-16.

"I can't remember ever seeing the course in any better condition. The greens are fast and really rolling well. It was fun to play here again," said Aydlett, who is apparently back at full speed after suffering a broken collarbone in December that kept him out of golf for three months.

Derek Busby, a Tech junior from Tallulah, shot 38-33—71 to tie for 22nd although he also double bogeyed No. 1.

"After doubling the first hole, I played well. I was conservative off the tee, maybe using my driver only twice on the backside," and that led to birdies on 10-11-15.

Busby is fresh off an exciting round last week at Deerfield in Jackson, Miss., where he qualified for the Southern Amateur (July 13-16 at Myrtle Beach, S.C.). He made a 40-foot birdie on 18 to reach a playoff and then eagled the first playoff hole to earn the spot.

Ironically, the man Busby nipped in that playoff is LSU golfer Aaron Smith, who won the Louisiana Amateur recently and also shot 71 here Wednesday.

Smith said, "I wouldn't call this a good ball-striking round, but there are a lot of birdie holes out there. I was able to take advantage of a couple of par-5s (birdieing 6 and 16) but mainly I was just grinding."

Corey Bartlett of Kilbourne, who won an individual state title this spring and signed to play at Louisiana Tech, opened with a solid 74.

He also double-bogeyed No. 1, but then produced five birdies. "I need to be more consistent," Bartlett said. "You have to drive the ball straight, especially on the back (nine) because the fairways are tight and the trees are big back there."

A couple of local golfers who go into today in the group of 13 at 75 include 1999 Cotton States champion Bob Cooper and Sterlington's Dusty Green, who just led the Panthers to the 2A state title.

Cooper said, "I didn't do anything exceptionally well — other than hole two bunker shots. I need a more solid round tomorrow."

Green, who will play his college golf at Louisiana College, said, "I drove the ball beautifully, but my short game cost me a few strokes today. I've got to chip and putt better in the second round."

Three others of local interest who are still alive at 76 include four-time Cotton States runner-up Henry Cole, Stewart Causey and Austin, Texas, high school standout Matthew Harvey, who was all-state at St. Frederick before his family moved.

Harvey's round was the most interesting, although it ended on a sour note.

After shooting 2-over 38 on the front, Harvey battled back to even par with a birdie on No. 10, a chip-in eagle on the par-5 No. 14 and a chip-in birdie on No. 17.

Then disaster struck on No. 18 when he got in trouble off the tee and eventually posted an eight to finish the round at 4-over-par.

"I hit a lot of good shots to end up like that. But I am looking forward to tomorrow and believe I can shoot under par," the 17-year-old said.