

# A win going away: Looper claims Cotton States title with one hole left

The W.E. Cole Cotton States golf tournament's first-place trophy is back in the hands of a Louisianian for the first time since 2001.

LSU senior Ken Looper claimed the honor on Saturday by defeating Purdue senior Nakanintra "Boom" Ratanakul by two holes with one to play.

"Last year, I lost in a playoff in the State Amateur, so this year was kind of redemption for me," said Looper, who won the Louisiana Golf Association Amateur Championship two weeks ago. "And playing in this is a little different because it's kids from all over, so this is a bigger win." Ratanakul hit a tee shot about 3 feet from the hole on No. 15, eventually making par to cut Looper's lead to one hole with three remaining.

"I was thinking if I can get it down and get it to even, I'm going to win this tournament," Ratanakul said. But Looper answered right away.

The Mandeville native put his second shot just off the front edge of the green on par-5 No. 16, leaving Ratanakul in a tough position when he hit his own second shot into a bunker off the left side. "I hit a good shot on the first shot and just had about 230 yards," Ratanakul said. "So many things came into my mind. I didn't decide to step back. I decided to just hit it, and I hit a bad shot." Ratanakul took two more shots to reach the green and then fell to a two-hole deficit on a missed putt for par. "I'd heard coming into the match that he'd been birdying a lot of holes," Looper said. "I guess we were just too tired to make birdies because neither of us hit that many." The Thailand native's tee shot on No. 17 all but sealed his fate, as it sailed into a bunker off the back-right edge of the green. "It was just completely a bad swing," he said. "And I knew I had to make it to advance to the next hole, but I just pulled my bunker shot. It's not a good finish, but it's experience — just take this tournament and grow up and be a better golfer." Looper finished the hole in three shots for par and the victory.

"Actually in the first match, I hit in that bunker and then hit it to within a foot," he said. "But after he missed that bunker shot, I figured it was over."

Looper birdied the first hole of the afternoon to take a control on the match of which he rarely let go. He won six of the afternoon's 17 holes and managed to hold Ratanakul to ties on nine others. Ratanakul won holes to draw even twice and took No. 15 to cut his deficit to one, but Looper answered each time.

Both golfers said they found themselves tiring by the end of their sixth round of match play and eighth total round in this week's summer heat. "It's not about swings — it's about the mental game," Ratanakul said. "You get a lot of people watching you, and if you don't stay on your game, you're going to slip up. We're both tired and both played our best, but his game is just a little bit better. He deserved it."

Looper's afternoon victory came on the heels of a morning semifinal that proved to be his toughest round in days.

Josh Jones, a former LSU golfer transferring to North Texas this year as a junior, forced his friend Looper to an extra hole before faltering.

"That was one of the best matches I've ever had," Looper said. "We were back and forth the entire day. I was two up through two holes, and he was up two holes with two holes to play. That was tough because I hadn't play on No. 16 the whole tournament, so I was kind of nervous. I had to dig deep on that one."

Looper had taken large enough leads in his first four matches to finish by at least hole No. 15.

"Friday was very nice because I finished at 2:30 and had the rest of the day to just rest," Looper said. "I didn't practice after that day because I was too tired."

Ratanakul earned his way to the final by defeating Wichita State sophomore Tyler Gann by three holes with two to play.

Looper and Ratanakul said they will be back next year if possible, depending on graduation dates and other tournaments.