

A wide open field - Defending champ faces tough competition

W.E. Cole Cotton States Amateur Invitational officials talked beforehand about the deeper, more competitive field at this year's event.

If defending champion Ken Looper needed any proof, he didn't have to wait long or look far.

Looper, who recently finished his college eligibility at LSU, played Tuesday and Wednesday's qualifying rounds in a foursome that included Argentina's Martin Kim and the University of Oklahoma's Abraham Ancer and Riley Pumphrey.

Ancer's first-day score of 65 and two-day total of 136 were both bests and as good a support for the field's depth as anything as the golfers enter match play Thursday.

"Looking at the scores, it's more competitive," Looper said. "There are more players and better players."

The first day saw 18 scores under par. Fifteen golfers finished Wednesday with total qualifying scores under par.

Looper said he only remembered four qualifying scores under par in 2010.

"I felt really good my first round, really confident hitting the ball," said Ancer, who will be a junior at Oklahoma in the fall. "Not so good my second one, but I still managed to score well, so I feel good. It's all just going to be putting the ball in play on the fairway and whoever makes more putts."

Ancer's 65 Tuesday caught everyone's attention, but Looper said he wasn't altogether surprised.

"I played well and just missed a couple putts, so it's definitely out there," said Looper, who finished Tuesday with a 68. "It's not something ridiculous like a 59. I can see getting a 65 out there if you play well." The now-former Tiger wasn't too far behind Ancer either day, following his 68 with a 73 for a 141 qualifying score. But there's not a lot of question Looper, Ancer or whoever eventually claims the 2011 title has three tough days in front of him as the golfers with the lowest qualifying scores enter match play this morning.

The cut sat at 152 when play finished Wednesday.

Tyler Gann, who reached the 2010 semifinals, finished just behind Ancer at 138. Five golfers tied for third at 140. Kim put together his own strong start to the event, playing along side Ancer, Looper and Pumphrey, to earn a 141.

"The guys who played with me are good," Kim said. "They're good players, but I'm a good player too, and I hope to win this tournament." Former Louisiana Tech golfer Clinton Shepard proved himself one of this year's top contenders when he followed a 72 Tuesday with a 68 Wednesday for a combined 140.

"The field is definitely stacked. I can't wait to get into match play," Shepard said. "(Looper) won this tournament and the (Louisiana) state amateur last year, so he's an extremely good player, and he's already proved himself, but he's got his work cut out for him. Whoever wins is going to have to play six matches of his best golf to get there."

Ancer and Pumphrey both had big praise for Looper.

"He was fun to watch," said Pumphrey, who cleared the cut by two strokes. "He hit it really well. He's just a really good player, and he's going to be good in match play."

Given the player-versus-course nature of sport, though, the Sooners said seeing one of their top competitors during qualifying didn't provide much of an advantage.

On top of the course and field, Looper may have a bit of history to overcome, too.

No golfer has successfully defended his Cotton States crown since Stan Lee in 1974. But then, no Louisiana player had won it at all since 2001 — until Looper.

"Obviously I want to defend, but I can't think, 'I won last year,' and just cruise," he said. "I've still got to give it my all, but yeah, it would be nice to win it two times in a row."