

New and improved Cotton States hits links this week

Keith Prince / General Assignment
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A lot of golf fans in America celebrated the stunning British Open victory produced Sunday by young U.S. pro Ben Curtis.

But to tell the truth, there may have been very few who appreciated the victory more than Monroe physician Dr. Rey Yatco.

If that sounds like a stretch, it is only because you didn't know that Yatco is helping lead the charge to elevate the already prestigious W.E. Cole Cotton States Invitational Golf Tournament to a much higher status in the amateur golf world.

And the win by Curtis - who had been a top amateur while making All-America at Kent State several years ago - provides a perfect example of the type of young players who will soon be headed to Monroe for the Cotton States.

In fact, the 52nd annual Cotton States comes to Bayou DeSiard Country Club this Thursday through Sunday, and the initial step in this "elevated status" will begin showing up then.

"We received a real shot in the arm last spring when Golf Week/Titleist accepted the Cotton States into its national amateur ranking system," Yatco said.

Beginning this year, the Cotton States winner will receive 25 points in their ranking race and the runner-up will earn 20 points.

"This is a huge step for our tournament because all of the nation's top amateurs will soon know that a victory here could be a major step for them in the rankings," Yatco said.

It hasn't taken long for the news to get out.

"As of Sunday, we had 11 of the nation's top 300 amateur golfers entered in the Cotton States," Yatco said. "We've never had that many before and while this year's field will still have a very regional flavor, we are already getting more attention outside the South."

But this year's tournament will only scratch the surface of what is likely to happen to the Cotton States in the future.

"We won't actually begin reaping the full benefits of our new ranking status until next year," feels Yatco.

"The key is getting your name out there with extensive information about the tournament. Some of that will happen in national golf publications.

"But also soon after this year's tournament concludes, we will be producing a Cotton States Web site," he said.

"Right now there are about 40 elite amateur tournaments in the country, including the Cotton States, and nearly all of them have Web sites to promote their event. We will be joining them in that approach soon."

Certainly it will be appealing when the Cotton States can call attention to its rich tradition that includes former champions like PGA greats Don January, Jackie Cupit and Hal Sutton along with other participants like David Toms, former British Open champion Bill Rogers, former British Open runner-up Brian Watts, current Seniors superstar Dr. Gil Morgan and this past week's B.C. Open runner-up Steve Lowery.

Ironically, while this year's field will be much stronger than previously, it is actually going to be slightly smaller with 96 entrants.

"I think it is somewhat because we have lowered the entrance requirement from a 4.0 handicap to a 2.0," Yatco said. "Again, this will ensure us of a greater field. I do know that virtually none of the other ranked tournaments have more than 96 players."

As far as individual rankings go, 1998 Cotton States champion John Humphries is ranked No. 57 according to the NCAA. Most recently, Humphries completed a stellar season at LSU and in June won the Louisiana state amateur title. He placed fifth in the SEC Tournament.

Also, defending Cotton States champ Zach Atkinson of Coppell, Texas, and the University of North Texas returns and is No. 75 nationally. While the lanky Texan was extremely impressive here last year, he also made his mark elsewhere by becoming the low amateur in the 2002 Texas State Open at 4-under for four rounds.

Another top 100 golfer coming is Neven Basic of Sydney, Australia, a semifinalist in the 2001 Australian Amateur.

Other ranked players who are coming are Adam Swope of LSU and brother Brian, Garrett Prather of LSU, Drew Pigg of TCU, Jason Lindgren of North Texas, Chris Rogers of Ole Miss, Doug McKeever of SMU and Jonathan Jackson of

Arkansas-Little Rock.

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