

ORONDO — Few noticed the hot final round **Bob Conrad** of Bellevue was putting together at the Northwest Open Invitational at Desert Canyon **Golf** Resort on Wednesday.

That is, until Conrad's final two holes on the Desert Nine when he went 3-under par to finish a fabulous 64. Then Conrad won a playoff against second-round leader Brian Thornton of Kent's Riverbend Country Club.

Both finished regulation with 10-under-par 206 in the three-day tourney. Conrad drained a 15-foot birdie putt on Desert No. 9, the hole he eagled minutes earlier. Meanwhile, Thornton was forced to take an unplayable lie on his approach and missed a par putt.

Conrad's playoff victory, worth \$5,000, completed a 10-stroke comeback against Thornton during the final round. On Tuesday, Thornton bolted into the lead with a course tourney record 63. Conrad began the day nine back.

"I've never come from that far back before," Conrad said. "I've been hitting good shots, but it hadn't shown up in my scores."

The biggest shots came at the end. Conrad trailed Thornton by three strokes after he finished the short 135-yard par 3 Desert No. 7 with a par.

"I thought I let a big chance get away," Conrad said. "I was thinking I need to birdie the last three holes if I'm going to catch Brian."

Conrad birdied the next hole, a 373-yard par 4, for the second straight day. Then, Conrad went after an eagle on the 476-yard finishing hole.

A big drive left him just 162 yards away. Conrad pulled out a nine iron and hit it 20 feet past the pin. Conrad's putt rolled to the edge and the ball dropped in on its last half turn.

"I had a good stroke on the putt, but I thought I might have hit it too soft," Conrad said. "I almost did."

The eagle improbably left Thornton needing a birdie to force a playoff. Thornton opened his final round with a birdie and was 13-under after his third hole of the day. He made the turn at 12-under and stumbled with a double bogey on the long par 4, a 495-yard challenge on Desert No. 1.

"I had two bad holes on that back nine," Thornton said. "The first was right away and then I fought back until that last par 3."

Thornton put together five straight pars. Then he hit his tee shot at the par 3 barely to the front edge of the green. It left him 30 feet away with a bending, uphill shot.

"I just chunked that tee shot," Thornton said.

Thornton considered putting, but used his wedge instead. He hit a low liner 30 feet past the pin.

"It was the shot I had to take," Thornton said. "I couldn't putt it since I would have had to roll the ball through the rough with the break. I just didn't hit the shot."

He was left with a challenging downhill putt, breaking to his right. The putt went 10 feet wide, but Thornton made it for a bogey.

He followed with a par on Desert No. 8 after birdies the first two days. Thornton had also birdied the finishing hole in each of the earlier rounds.

"I knew what I had to do after my drive," Thornton said. "I heard what Bob did, so I knew I had to go for an eagle."

Thornton's approach landed 15 feet past the hole. His eagle attempt stayed just to the right, a foot short to set up the extra hole.

In the playoff, the drives set the tone. Conrad went to the left side of the fairway, the distance similar to his earlier drive. Thornton went right, in the rough with a clear view of the green.

Thornton hit first with his ball going into the bushes on the front portion of the canyon separating the fairway from the green. He was forced to take the unplayable lie.

"I was in the rough and my club got caught up," Thornton said.

Conrad hit a clean shot, landing his second shot 15 feet to the right of the pin. He just missed his eagle putt.

During the final round, Conrad played one group ahead of the final pairing. Thornton was joined by past champion Rick Fehr (the former Desert Canyon pro now at Trilogy **Golf** Club near Redmond) and Ryan Benzel of the Seattle **Golf** Club.

"It helped me to not be in that final group," Conrad said. "I was going along, playing well and people were focused on the last group."

Thornton wasn't thinking about Conrad for most of his round.

"Until the final couple of holes, I was worried about Rick (Fehr)," Thornton said.

The Kent pro had reason for concern. Fehr had numerous birdie putts sliding just by on the back nine. The 1994 champion finished alone in third, three shots back, after a final-day 71.

Desert Canyon pro Von Smith had the lowest finish among local competitors, tied for 19th at 223 (7 over par). Smith shot a final round 73, equaling Monday's opening round.

A 34 on the Lakes nine gave Smith optimism halfway through his final round.

"On the first two days, I was 7 over on the Lakes side," Smith said. "I felt pretty good going 2 under. Then I had problems on the Desert side, going 3 over."

Notes: Three other area golfers competed in the final round. Amateur Dan Johnston of Wenatchee **Golf** and Country Club and Mike Schoner of Moses Lake G&CC finished at 231, tied for 56th. Lew Mullen, also a Wenatchee G&CC amateur, was 60th at 232. ... Mike Fields of Lake Padden GC defended his low amateur title. Fields shot a 215 to finish in a tie for sixth. ... The finishing hole played exactly as the Desert Canyon organizers hoped, Smith said. "We wanted to make it a hole a player could score on, but also make it a challenge. That's just what happened." Smith also praised the course grounds crew for "all their marvelous work." ... The Northwest Open will return to Desert Canyon in 2005. It alternates with Homestead Farms **Golf** Resort in Lynden in a four-year cycle under a sponsorship agreement with Great Links **Golf** Resort. ... Wenatchee Valley College was one of the sponsors and received a \$5,000 check. Members of various WVC athletic teams served as volunteers.

FINAL LEADERS

(Top 25, plus NCW finishers, x-won playoff, a-amateur)

x-**Bob Conrad** (Bellevue), \$5,000 75-67-64—206

Brian Thornton (Riverbend GC), \$3,600 70-63-73—206

Rick Fehr (Trilogy GC), \$2,700 70-68-71—209

Ryan Benzel (Seattle GC), \$2,200 69-70-72—211

Mark Olson (Tyee Valley GC) \$1,900 75-69-70—214

Bob Rannow (Sandpines GC), \$1,700 73-69-73—215

Mike Fields (a, Lake Padden GC), \$500 78-71-66—215

Mike Gove (Inglewood GC), \$1,500 72-70-75—217

Brent Murray (Oswego Lake GC), \$1,223 77-70-71—218

Todd Erwin (Performance **Golf**), \$1,223 76-70-72—218

Mike Early (Port Townsend GC), \$1,223 75-70-73—218

Chuck Milne (Vanco Driving Range), \$1,223 80-66-72—218

Brad Faller (a,Sahalee CC), \$350 80-69-70—219

Mark Gardner (Creek at Qualchan), \$1,070 76-72-72—220

J.D. Cline (Willows Run GC), \$1,020 77-73-71—221

Paul Houvener (a, Mill Creek GC), \$250 76-70-75—221

Scott Lentz (West Linn, Ore.), \$945 77-69-76—222

John Kawasoe (Astoria GCC), \$945 78-74-70—222

Chris Griffin (Tacoma GCC), \$823 74-78-71—223

John Sheldon (Tamarisk GC), \$823 70-79-74—223

Kent Brown (a, Dominion Meadows), \$175 79-72-72—223

Chris Morrow (Tumwater Valley GC), \$175 77-70-76—223

Joe Sievers (Washington National), \$823 78-72-73—223

Von Smith (Desert Canyon), \$823 73-77-73—223

Jeff Coston (Semiahmoo GCC), \$696 82-73-69—224

Travis Long (South Shore GC), \$696 78-73-73—224

Chris Curran (MeadowWood GC), \$696 82-72-70—224

Brett Eaton (Homestead Farms), \$696 74-73-77—224

Also:

56, Dan Johnston (a, Wenatchee GCC), \$50 78-75-78—231

56, Mike Schoner (Moses Lake GCC), \$50 79-77-75—231

