

Entering the final round of the **Washington Open** Invitational with a one-stroke lead, Michael **Combs** knew his top priority.

And with a 25-foot birdie putt as the only obstacle between his fifth Northwest major victory and a \$6,000 top prize, the Kennewick golfer knew he needed to sink it.

"I told myself on the last hole, 'I'm going to react rather than being too careful,'" he said.

And when the putt dropped on the 18th green at **Meridian** Valley Country Club, he reacted with an arm pump, a la Kirk Gibson in the 1988 World Series.

With the nines reversed, **Combs** finished with a five-under 211, two strokes better than second place Scott Leritz of Portland's Waverly Country Club and Ryan Benzel of Seattle Golf Club.

Combs started the round at 8-under and lost two strokes when he double-bogeyed the third hole, a 214-yard par-3.

Combs and Leritz were tied at 5-under starting the 11th with Yong K Lee, who tied for fourth, trailing by a stroke.

Leritz had back-to-back bogeys on 13 and 14, and Lee, of Tacoma's North Shore Golf and Country Club, missed an eight-foot putt on 14 to put him at 4-under, one stroke behind **Combs**.

On 15, **Combs** hit into the rough on the right side of the 186-yard par-3.

He got to the green in two, but his shot wouldn't sit and he bogeyed the hole, tying Lee at 4-under.

Then Lee lost his swing tempo.

"I tried to make a cut off the tee," Lee said of the 392-yard, par-4 16th. "I went straight and hit the tree. I (didn't) have a shot. I had to do a layup."

Lee two-putted for a bogey, as did Leritz, who dropped two strokes behind **Combs**.

A former **Meridian** Valley member, Lee made the 17th green in two and hit a clutch 9-footer to save par. Leritz sunk a 15-footer for birdie and **Combs** was consistent.

"Consistently bad," said **Combs**, who made par on 17. "My putter was real shaky.

"Yesterday I putted well and today I made one birdie all day."

That birdie came when he needed it most.

"I'd figured we'd be going to a playoff," **Combs** said. "I took two practice swings, one look at the hole and hit it."

Benzel, tied for fifth entering the final round, was the only top-three finisher to shoot par. Lon Hinkle, runner-up in 2004, tied for fourth at 214. Defending champion Keith Coleman of Harbour Pointe missed the cut at 151 by two strokes.

Former Mariners pitcher Erik Hanson of Sahalee Country Club and Tom Brandes of Rainier Golf and Country Club were the top amateurs, each taking home \$450 for eighth place.

"I stayed away from the three-putts and I concentrated on lagging the ball close on approach shots," said Hanson, who had the lowest final round score at 69. "And I was just praying. The course was so tough, I knew even-par would be tough."

Combs, a part-time security officer at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, said he was surprised and elated when his putt dropped on 18. Strolling the back nine, he wasn't happy with his game.

"But there are a lot more important things than how your golf game is going," said **Combs**, 38.

Six weeks ago, his 4-year-old son, Acton, was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

"He's got about an 80 percent chance of being cancer-free in five years," he said. "And he's responded very well to his first round of chemotherapy."

Within minutes of accepting his trophy and made-for-TV winner's check, **Combs** was en route to his family's hotel room near Children's Hospital.

His top priority was being with Acton, 7-year-old son Pavin and his wife, Corie.

That, **Combs** said, is the real No. 1.

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