

State golf championship is ‘dream come true’ for Justin Hemings

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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EDWARDVILLE - Nearly every high school athlete dreams of the day he or she stands above the rest in with a gold medal draped around the neck or state trophy in hand.

For some, the dream might be swishing that last-second shot to win the state tournament in basketball, or darting to the end zone for the championship in football. But for **Justin Hemings**, it was coming home on the 18th hole with people chanting, “state champ, state champ.”

Hemings, an Edwardsville High School senior, captured the gold Saturday at the IHSA State Golf Tournament at The Den at Fox Ridge in Bloomington, a par-72 course. He fired a 1-under 71 Saturday to go with a 2-over 74 on Friday for a 1-over 145 to take the state individual golf championship by two strokes. Crystal Lake Prairie Ridge’s Ethan Farnam was second with a 3-over 147. Lake Forest’s Connor Poldender was third with a 6-over 150.

In an interview Sunday afternoon, Hemings said he didn’t know if it had truly sunk in yet what he had done the magical day before.

“Still looking back, I can’t believe it,” he said. “It is pretty cool thinking I am a state champion this year and I am really proud. I am happy I could lead my team.”

A team player first and foremost, Hemings said, “I did want us to finish in the top three so all the people with me could get a medal, but I am still proud of my team being fourth.”

Hemings knew he was having another good day on Saturday, but when he was coming down to the 18th hole, he knew if he could just make a par he could possibly finish in the top five.

He pulled out his driver and slashed the ball down the right side uphill, about 130 yards directly from the final pin. Hemings selected his next club and knocked the ball perfectly to the pin. In fact, by the way the crowd reacted, he thought it might have gone in once it hit the green, but it was right at the pin.

“Everybody started cheering and going crazy,” he said when he hit the shot to the 18th green. “It was a great way to end my high school career.”

Hemings apparently is the first golfer in Edwardsville High School history to win the state individual championship. Joe Malench was second in 1977 and female golfer Barb Anderson was also a second-place finisher in the fall of 1979. Anderson said it takes a lot of hard work to capture a state individual golf championship or runner-up spot and it requires not only ability, but “staying focused.”

“I was at the golf course from sun up to even into darkness,” Anderson said of her quest. “It takes a lot of support from family teammates and I had the help from the staff at Sunset Hills Country Club.”

Hemings said he thought he had the ability to capture the state championship, but he knew it would take his best effort and being consistent stroke after stroke.

“If I’m being honest, I felt I had the talent to do it, but there were a ton of great players at the state tournament,” he said. “I didn’t hit the ball fantastic both days, but I consistently hit the fairways and greens.”

Hinsdale Central won the team title with a score of 621, Winnetka New Trier was second with a 624, followed by Naperville Neuqua Valley in third with a 625, then Edwardsville with 628.

Hemings said he is extremely proud of his other teammates and the team’s success. He said the team’s success and the friendship with the other Tigers means as much to him as the individual title. He said he and the other players have grown up together and played golf together since they were young. His team members were as proud of him as anyone in the crowd, he said and he couldn’t thank them enough for their support.

The Edwardsville youth said the crowd was yelling “state champ, state champ” after his last shot, but he said he had to go inside the club house to see for himself.

“I went in and looked at the live leader board and with six holes to go, I had a 4-stroke lead over the next person,” he said. “I knew then it was possible.”

He said capturing first place in Illinois would definitely strengthen his chances of getting a college golf scholarship, although he is still not sure where he will attend school. Hemings said he plans to major in accounting or business in college and hopes to continue his golf play even beyond college if possible.

For now, he said he will relish he is the top golfer in Illinois and his team is right at the top of list of state boys teams.

“I still can’t believe it,” he said with excitement in his voice. “It is a dream come true.”