

First-Round Notes – Thursday, February 18, 2021

Course Setup: Par 71 / 7,113 yards

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First-Round Leaderboard

Pos.	Name	Scores
T1	Brett Coletta	63 (-8)
T1	George Cunningham	63 (-8)
T1	Albin Choi	(-8) thru 17
4	Dan McCarthy	64 (-7)

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Brett Coletta, George Cunningham and Albin Choi share first-round lead at LECOM Suncoast Classic

LAKEWOOD RANCH, Fla. – Brett Coletta and George Cunningham opened the Korn Ferry Tour’s first round of 2021 with matching 8-under 63s – with Albin Choi reaching 8-under thru 17 holes – to co-lead at the LECOM Suncoast Classic. The trio lead Dan McCarthy by one stroke as play was suspended due to darkness at Lakewood National Golf Club’s Commander course. Ten players remained on the course when play was suspended.

In 2020, Choi stepped away from competitive golf to caddie for PGA TOUR star Sungjae Im. Choi was on the bag for Im’s breakthrough win at the 2020 Honda Classic. He returned to competitive golf four months ago and gained entry to the LECOM Suncoast Classic through the Monday qualifier.

“It feels great to be back, just great to be back playing,” smiled Choi, a 28-year-old Canadian. “After caddying, it made me want to go play even more. I got to watch some pretty good golf for a few months and it really inspired me to pick the clubs back up...I was in a bad place mentally and have gone through a lot of stuff over the past year and a half or so. But all of that time off made me realize it wasn’t so bad. I’m just glad to be here.”

Starting at the 10th, Choi birdied his first four holes en route to a front-nine 30 and tacked on three more at Nos. 2, 5 and 8. He hit his drive in the fairway of the par-5 ninth before play was suspended due to darkness. The North Carolina State alum is competing in his first PGA TOUR-sanctioned event since 2019.

Competing in the first tee time of the day, Coletta was 1-over through the first three holes but eagled the drivable par-4 fourth hole after hitting the green and sinking a 30-foot putt. The 24-year-old added three more birdies on the front nine and five more on the back nine (countered by a lone bogey). He capped his day with a 40-foot birdie at the 18th from the front of the green to match his career-low round on Tour.

“I had a read off of Billy [Kennerly] actually on 18 which was quite nice, but it was front edge maybe 40 feet up the hill and down to the right,” said Coletta. “I was going to be happy with a two-putt to be honest, but when it rains it pours I guess.”

The Australian spent the break in Orlando after opting not to go home to Australia amid COVID-19 travel restrictions. The Korn Ferry Tour’s last tournament took place in October at the Orange County National Championship presented by Knight 39.

“I really wanted to go back for Christmas and spend time with the family, but I weighed out my options and decided to stay here,” said Coletta who made just five of 16 cuts in 2020 but capitalized by finishing top-25 in all five of those events. “My offseason was very lowkey; I got into fishing actually...I like to be fresh. I’m not the one to go beat balls on the range. I just kept on top of what I needed to keep on top of.”

Cunningham began his day with five consecutive pars before a birdie at the par-5 sixth hole. After two more pars, Cunningham ripped off seven straight birdies from Nos. 9-15 to reach 8-under. The birdie streak was the best of his life, outpacing his previous best of five consecutive birdies.

“I was in the zone a little bit during that back nine,” laughed Cunningham. “I was a bit nervous to mention the birdie run that I was on. My previous best was five in a row. I knew I was getting close but I didn’t want to say it and jinx it. I was very focused and before I knew it I had it to six in a row and then seven.”

The 25-year-old was having a down season for most of 2020 – including 14 missed straight missed cuts at one point – but finished with back-to-back finishes of T3 and T6 in the final two events before the break. He rose from No. 120 in the standings to 71st after those two top-10 finishes.

“I worked really hard over the offseason; I knew my game was close towards the end of last season so I wanted to capitalize on where I was at,” said Cunningham, who built a golf simulator in his barn during the offseason. “I worked a lot on my golf swing, a little bit on the mental side and of course some on the short game. My long game is what I focused the most on, I gained a little bit of distance and tried to keep the consistency.”

The first round will resume at 7:20 a.m. on Friday morning. Second-round tee times will run from 6:55 a.m. to 2:01 p.m. off of the first and 10th tees on Friday.

Thursday Notes

- Thursday’s weather: Partly cloudy with a high of 85 degrees and wind S/SW at 10-20 mph
- The LECOM Suncoast Classic is the first event of 2021 and the 24th event of the 2020-21 combined season; Wake Forest University alum Will Zalatoris leads the points standings entering the week and has led for the past nine weeks; Coletta and Cunningham would each project to move inside the top-25 with a win while also looking to become the fifth 18-hole leader/co-leader to go on to victory this season
- Competing in his 111th career event on the Korn Ferry Tour, Choi would earn the second lead/co-lead after a round on Tour with a par or better at the ninth on Friday morning
- Cunningham’s flawless scorecard was one of six completed bogey-free rounds on Thursday; Choi was also bogey-free through 17 holes

- Defending champion Andrew Novak opened with a 4-under 67 (T30); Novak is seeking to become the first player to successfully defend his title in the Korn Ferry Tour's 32-year history
- Northwestern alum David Lipsky (T5) opened with a 6-under 65; Lipsky is the only player in the field that will also compete across the street on the PGA TOUR next week at the World Golf Championships-Workday Championship at The Concession due to his top-10 ranking in the European Tour's Race to Dubai
- Mark Hensby, a 49-year-old Australian, carded a 6-under 65 to sit T5; the 65 is his lowest round in a PGA TOUR-sanctioned event since the 2015 Barbasol Championship where he finished T6
- This week's purse is \$600,000 with \$108,000 going to the champion; the champion will also receive 500 Korn Ferry Tour points
- The combined 2020-21 Korn Ferry Tour schedule will conclude with 25 PGA TOUR cards awarded in August at the 2021 Pinnacle Bank Championship presented by Aetna, with an additional 25 cards awarded at the conclusion of the 2021 Korn Ferry Tour Finals