

Pavin ready to defend crown

BY JIM TOTH
STAFF WRITER

Golf indeed is a funny game when the year's biggest shot comes from one of its smallest competitors.

At 5-9 and 150 pounds, Corey Pavin doesn't strike anyone as an imposing figure on the golf course. But combine fiery competitiveness with newly-found patience and you have one of the Professional Golf Association's great talents in this his 14th season on tour.

Pavin enters the 96th U.S. Open Championship as no other during his professional career. His status as defending champion came as a result of his 1995 U.S. Open title won at Shinnecock Hills in New York. The win was Pavin's first in a major event and laid to rest the knock of him being "the best player never to win a major."

"Winning the Open was a big thrill for me," the biggest thrill in my golf career," said Pavin, who currently has 14 victories to his credit on the pro tour. "Coming into this year's Open, I hope to defend my title successfully. I'm not just here to play. I'm here to win."

Pavin will get that opportunity Thursday when the world's top touring professionals tackle the 6,974-yard South Course at Oakland Hills Country Club.

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tion, has hosted five previous Opens. The last came in 1985 when Andy North rallied on the final day to take a one-stroke victory over the trio of Dave Barr, T.C. Chen and Denis Watson.

Pavin, whose previous best finish in an Open came in '85, said he remembers the South Course as "being very hard and very solid," one through 18.

"I remember it's a long course with undulating greens and the one who

hits the long putts will be critical in determining the champion," Pavin said. "I also remember of playing well here and competing and having a chance to win. It was a good experience for me and taught me that the U.S. Open is never complete until the 18th hole is played."

Pavin said developing more patience has been a key contributor to not only winning last year's Open, but becom-

ing a steady and successful player on tour.

"I learned patience is a big thing in majors," Pavin said. "You have to learn to stay calm out there and not get frustrated. Often times it's difficult to do because it is the U.S. Open and there is a great deal of pressure."

Pavin kept his cool long enough at Shinnecock to be in contention on the final day. Rounds of 72, 69 and 71 left him three strokes off the pace with 18 to play. His closing 68, highlighted by "The Shot" — gave him a two-stroke win over Greg Norman.

"The Shot" came on the tournament's 72nd hole when Pavin fired a 228-yard 4-wood to within five feet of the pin. He two-putted for par and the championship.

"I can't think of any shot that I have hit better under pressure than that one," he would say later.

Pavin said it's been a fun ride following last year's heroics.

"It's been fun being Open champion," Pavin said. "One thing I'll never forget was two days after winning the Open I played in a Tom Watson outing with Tom, Nick Price and Craig Stadler. Tom Watson was the first person to introduce me as U.S. Open champion. That was a great memory and one I will take with me forever."



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