



Amateurs win their shot at the big time

NICOLE JEFFERY
GOLF

Amateurs have dominated the final qualifying tournament for this week's Australian Open in Sydney, taking nine of the 10 spots available.

Ballina teenager Jay Mackenzie, 18, was the youngest man to earn his place yesterday and 21-year-old John Lyras will also make his Australian Open debut, three years after finishing high school primarily as a cricketer, then deciding to pursue golf.

Mackenzie missed qualifying by one stroke last year but made amends yesterday, winning a playoff to clinch the final place available at Liverpool Golf Club, after shooting a two-under 70.

Lyras, who won the qualifier at Ryde-Parramatta (three-under, 68), was virtually unknown to Australia's elite amateur ranks until two years ago, having spent most of his teenage years at Sydney's Cranbrook School, where there was no golf program and his games were restricted to weekend rounds with his father.

Lyras said despite spending his high school years playing cricket, golf was always his preference.

"I wanted to play golf my whole life," he said.

"I just wasn't able to play golf during my high school years. I've been able to put golf first in front of everything since I finished in 2014.

"It's nice to see my progression, how fast it's been."

Lyras also qualified for last year's NSW Open, his previous experience in a professional tournament, but that turned out to be a school of hard knocks. He shot a 67 in the first round but signed an incorrect scorecard and was disqualified, an experience he plans to avoid this week.

"Hopefully, I'll have a good solid week out there, really good to experience my first proper professional tournament and enjoy it as much as I can," he said.

"There's not really a better course that I'd prefer to play in Sydney for an Aussie Open. I've just got to get my head around the fact that I've qualified for the Aussie Open and try to play my best golf come Thursday."

As a latecomer to the elite side of the sport, the product of St Michael's club in Sydney's Little Bay, Lyras tried to educate himself this year by going to England midyear to play some amateur events. He

came back knowing he had to improve his ball-striking and his consistency if he wanted to be competitive as a professional.

"I came back from that trip really invigorated by how much better I needed to get," he said.

"I've had some good results in amateur golf. I'm kind of ticking off some boxes of what my goals are. To qualify for an Australian Open, it doesn't get much better than that for an Australian."

Other qualifiers included former Victorian amateur champion Zach Murray and former Victorian junior champion Konrad Ciupek.



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DAVID TEASE

Amateur players grabbed nine of the 10 qualifying spots available for the Australian Open yesterday, including Sydney-based John Lyras