

Luke Neeley slips into shot lead over defending champion Kolton Crawford



Luke Neeley hits his second shot to the ninth green en route to a 73.

Luke Neeley pulled into a one-shot lead after shooting a 2-over-par 73 at Shady Oaks Country Club on a steamy Wednesday, but he couldn't help but be wary of the golfer just behind him as they head into Thursday's final round of the FWJGA Boys City Junior Golf Championship at Colonial Country Club. Neeley owns a 54-hole 4-over-par 216 after a 71 at Meadowbrook and a 72 at River Crest C.C.

"He's a better golfer than I am, and he's played as the No. 1 or No. 2 spots (on the golf team)," he said of his nearest pursuer, 18-year-old Kolton Crawford, the defending champion. Crawford posted his second consecutive 71 after closing with a flurry of three consecutive birdies and put himself in position to come from behind again to take the title. Last year, he rallied from five shots back to win in a playoff. Crawford also has played Colonial several times

while it will be Neeley's first time to play the storied layout and venue for the annual PGA Tour stop.

Neeley, a lefty, is home-schooled but he knows Crawford, one of the many Mansfield High School players in the tournament who play at Walnut Creek C.C., which also is Neeley's home course. "I'll have to play my best to have a chance," Neeley said.

Crawford is four in front of Hayden Frederick, 15 and another Mansfield player who passed several players with his 71, which tied Crawford for the day's low score.

One of the more disappointed players was second-round leader Dillon Vaughn, a 16-year-old who attends Joshua High School. He had built a three-shot lead after two rounds of 70, but became befuddled by the Shady Oaks fast greens and finished with an 85. "I three-putted eight greens," he said. "It was just one of those days. Everyone has one. I just wish mine didn't happen in this tournament. Thursday, I'll just go out and have fun. I'm out of (contention) now."

Crawford made the turn at three-over 39, but clipped three shots off par on the back nine thanks to his three closing birdies. "I hit the ball a lot closer to the pins and that gave me the opportunity to make more putts," he said. "My putting was a lot better today."

The 38-player Championship Flight field was cut to 14 for the final round, with a 230 total or lower making it. The

Championship, First, Second and Third flights will finish at Colonial. The players from

Woodhaven, who had been playing match play, will finish at Pecan Valley Hills and the four survivors in each flight will compete in stroke play. The Sycamore Creek 13-under boys will finish with match play between the two final players in each flight.

Awards ceremonies for everyone is scheduled at approximately 2:30 p.m. at Colonial, or whenever the final group finishes. The top two in each flight will receive trophies, but anyone is welcome to attend.

Neeley said he started slowly with bogeys on two of his first three holes. "I was struggling with the speed of the greens," he said. But he got a confidence boost by sinking a 15-footer for a birdie on the fifth hole. "I made a lot of pars, but made bogeys on 13 and 15, but I finished really well...par, par birdie." Neeley said he knew he needed to make the final birdie because he was positive that Crawford would make his. In fact, Crawford had called his finish heading into the final three holes. "He called it" when they came to the tee on on the 16th, Neeley said.

Frederick, who fell behind with an opening 78 in the first round at Meadowbrook, shot a 72 at River Crest to move back toward he front of the field. "I've been through a bit of a slump," he said. "Finally, it's started to turn around and my putting has come around."

It took three holes before his putting was smoothed out at Shady Oaks. "I three-putted the first two holes and then it came around," he said. Entering the tournament, Frederick said, "I wanted to finish in the top ten. Now I want to finish in the top three."