

AMATEUR

# Elliott's Excellent Expedition

## Top Senior Amateur Shines In Whirlwind Trip To U.K.

By Sean Fairholm ▪ August 8, 2019



Gene Elliott plays his tee shot to the fourth hole during the Senior Amateur Championship at North Berwick Golf Club in North Berwick, Scotland. Photo: Mark Runnacles, R&A via Getty Images

Isn't it true how the best performances in golf often are the ones that get off to an inauspicious start? That's what happened to 57-year-old Gene Elliott on his whirlwind journey to the U.K., although the arduous beginning had nothing to do with birdies or bogeys.

About 45 minutes prior to leaving for his trip to play in the Senior Open Championship qualifier, he received a text saying his flight to England out of Des Moines, Iowa, had been cancelled. Storms in the Chicago area wreaked havoc on air traffic and there were no other options for the day. That's like hitting your opening tee shot out of bounds and having to scramble for double bogey.

"I was in a panic mode, because you've got to get over there, you usually lose a day flying there, and the qualifier is going to be Monday no matter what," Elliott recalls.

Luckily, he and his wife, DaLena, found a flight the following day that got them to London, about a five-hour drive from Southport, England, where the qualifier was to take place. With DaLena on the bag, Elliott shot a 1-over 73.

It was the second consecutive year he'd earned a spot into the senior major. It takes a true lover of the game to maneuver through a logistical minefield, all for the chance to play an elite level of golf for free.

The travel presented a challenge but the conditions at Royal Lytham & St. Annes, where the championship took place, were far more ominous. The Senior Open endured two weather delays in Thursday's opening round and then saved a wicked deluge for Sunday. Elliott and one other player, Englishman Steven Kelbrick, were the only amateurs to make the cut. But it appeared as though the weather might end the contest early. That would have been welcome news for Elliott, who nursed a four-stroke lead in the race for low-amateur honors.

"I'd like to beat the pros and stuff, but there's one guy I've really got to beat," Elliott recalls thinking. His focus remained on the game within the game.

Elliott showed up at 7 a.m. for an 8:20 a.m. tee time, but several delays quickly led to him having a 3:10 p.m. time off the 10th tee. It didn't help matters that the decision to utilize threesomes pushed his group back further than anticipated. By the time he teed off, Elliott had been at the golf course for roughly eight hours. He could have flown home to Iowa in that amount of time.

He would need every bit of adrenaline necessary to carry him. Playing the 18th hole, his ninth of the day, Elliott hit his tee ball into the gorse and carded a costly triple bogey to bring Kelbrick back into the mix for low amateur. Elliott held a five-stroke lead in the amateur race prior to the mishap. Such leaderboard updates for this hidden duel weren't shown on the course. But DaLena checked her phone and provided updates to her husband as the day went forward.

He came through with his best swings of the week when he needed them most, steadying the ship to capture low amateur by four strokes.

A trophy ceremony alongside championship winner Bernhard Langer completed one of his longest days in golf. His prize at the end of it was an exemption into next year's Senior Open Championship at Sunningdale and a promised practice round with the defending champion.

“I was just proud of myself after the disaster in the middle of the round that I hung in there and shot even par on my last nine holes to accomplish what I set out to do.”

His caddie, a local from the area, asked Elliott where he would rank such an accomplishment given all of the accolades throughout his career.

“I told him it's definitely in the top five moments.”

Elliott's itinerary was only half crossed off at that point. Following the event, he and DaLena drove four and a half hours to North Berwick, Scotland, where the British Senior Amateur took place under much sunnier skies than what had greeted players for the Senior Open.

Gene Elliott and his wife, DaLena, after the British Senior Amateur.

*Photo: Courtesy DaLena Elliott*



His attitude and perspective changed with that championship. At Lytham, Elliott knew he couldn't realistically contend to win. But he has consistently shown the ability to do so in the British Senior Amateur where he arrived with back-to-back top-three finishes in the prior two years.

Despite the tired legs, Elliott added another close call to his record. He and another 57-year-old, Californian Craig Davis, went into a playoff for the title with Davis using a 40-year-old Tommy Armour putter to seal the victory on the third hole of sudden death. Elliott nearly won on the second playoff hole, but an attempt from nearly 100 feet lipped out.

It didn't quite go his way, but the trip had to be deemed a rousing success given the energy spent to navigate through Great Britain and the two podium appearances.

“Everything happened the way I wanted it to happen but it makes for a long couple of weeks,” Elliott said.

This next act of Elliott's career might be his best. He has climbed to No. 284 in the World Amateur Golf Ranking, which is impressive for a senior given the lack of points awarded in those events. Since turning 55 in February of 2017, Elliott has won the Iowa Senior Match Play, the Crump Cup, Iowa Masters, George C. Thomas Invitational, the Crane Cup, the Canadian Senior Amateur and the Iowa Senior Amateur.

The past two and a half years have been so kind that Elliott literally has remodeled part of his home to create a trophy room. That's only a small part of the joy he has found from senior golf.

“I had some good friends pave the way before me,” Elliott said. “I watched Chip Lutz and Paul Simson and some of those guys and what they have accomplished in senior golf and thought ‘Hey, it would be great if I could do some of that, too.’ It’s definitely better than playing against the mid-ams who hit it 50 yards past you.”

Golf doesn't get much better than when a player uses whatever means necessary to achieve his goals. This amateur trip will go unnoticed by most golf fans, but it has a soul that doesn't exist during the FedEx Cup Playoffs.

Elliott knows that is worth pursuing, no matter how many delays or car rides it takes to get there.