

DEFENDING CHAMP WINS ANOTHER TITLE

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BY SCOTT PASKE, The Wichita Eagle

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HUTCHINSON - Allen Doyle knew what awaited him Sunday at Prairie Dunes Country Club. He'd addressed it from the moment local favorite Tom Watson became a factor in the U.S. Senior Open.

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Yet those still had to be lonely walks for the defending champion as the large gallery voiced its overwhelming support for Watson, a native son.

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"Come on, Tom," they yelled.

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"You can do it, Tom."

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"You're the man, Tom."

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Perhaps Doyle, a hard-nosed, ex-college hockey player, finally had enough. As the crowd gave Watson one last raucous cheer, Doyle motioned for silence by putting his index finger over his mouth on the 18th green. He then tapped in for a par that sealed a two-shot victory over Watson and made him the first golfer since Gary Player 18 years ago to win back-to-back Senior Open titles.

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Doyle's final-round 68 yielded a 72-hole total of 8-under-par 272 and a \$470,000 paycheck, matching his haul from his 2005 Senior Open victory in Kettering, Ohio. Doyle became the oldest winner in the championship's 27-year history, accomplishing the feat 17 days before his 58th birthday.

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His crowning moment came on the penultimate hole, when he curled in a downhill, 14-footer for a birdie at the par-5 17th. That followed a crowd-pleasing approach shot from Watson that nestled three feet from the cup to set up his final birdie.

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"I don't want to toot my own horn, but if things are going pretty good, it's not that tough," Doyle said of playing in front of the pro-Watson crowd. "If things are going bad, it's brutal because you can't get righted."

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Doyle wasn't as flawless as he was in last year's final round, when he rallied from a nine-shot Sunday deficit with an 8-under 63 to win at NCR Country Club. But he proved to be an effective counter-puncher when Watson fired his best shots.

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Watson, playing three hours from his home in Stilwell, started the final round with a two-shot lead over Doyle and three ahead of Loren Roberts. But he three-putted for bogeys on the second and third holes, starting an afternoon game of hot potato with the lead.

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"That put me in the defensive type of mood, it seemed like," said Watson, who shot a 72. "And I just didn't get the offense working today."

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Doyle moved in front with an 8-foot birdie putt at No. 3. He and Watson shared the lead after Doyle bogeyed the par-4 fifth. Then 2004 champion Peter Jacobsen took his turn, moving to 7 under with consecutive birdies at Nos. 6 and 7.

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Jacobsen retreated with a double bogey at the par-4 ninth, and eventually settled for a third-place tie with Bruce Lietzke at 5 under. That opened the door for last year's co-runnerup, D.A. Weibring, who birdied seven of the first 12 holes to charge in front. But Weibring bogeyed the par-4 13th to fall into a four-way tie for the lead with Doyle, Watson and Andy Bean. Errant tee shots eventually forced Weibring and Bean from the hunt.

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Ironically, one of Doyle's wayward drives led to a positive momentum swing.

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Doyle hit his tee shot on the par-4 11th into the gully left of the fairway. Doyle's stance was inhibited by a burrowing animal hole, and he was granted relief by U.S. Golf Association rules official Jim Reinhart.

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Roberts, who was keeping Doyle's scorecard, appeared agitated by the ruling. But the free drop allowed Doyle to get his ball into the primary rough, where he saved par to protect his share of the lead.

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"The rules officials were right there and I checked with them before I did anything," Doyle said.

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Doyle took the lead for good when Watson lipped out a 3-foot par putt at No. 11. He pushed the advantage to two shots with a 6-foot birdie at No. 12, then matched Watson's birdie on the par-4 14th to get to 8 under.

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"Nothing silences a crowd and nothing says more to another player than when you top them, and that's my mindset," Doyle said. "I'm not worried about, 'Oh, I got to make this, I got to make this, got to make this.' I looked at it as, 'Boy, when I top him, that's going to mean something.'"

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After both golfers bogeyed the par-4 16th, Watson tried to reach the No. 17 in two with a driver from the fairway. His shot landed short and right of the green, but he followed with a wedge that dropped near the hole and incited loud cheers.

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Then Doyle answered with a right-to-left breaker that effectively ended Watson's title hopes.

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In the awards ceremony afterward at No. 18, Watson generated laughs when he turned to Doyle and said, "That putt on 17, you dog."

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Doyle, a former amateur star who joined the PGA Tour in 1996 at age 47, knew this was Watson country. He figured his wife, Kate, was his only fan in the gallery.

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That didn't stop him from reveling in the moment. Upon entering the interview area, he said, "Don't everybody look so surprised now," then settled into a chair with a beer and the Ouimet Memorial Trophy nearby.

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The large crowd surrounding the 18th green prevented Kate Doyle from getting a clear view of her husband's final stroll toward the title. But the Doyle's older daughter, Erin Packer, helped her out by cell phone.

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"She calls and says, 'Mom, just yell,' " Kate Doyle said. "He's got a two-shot lead, he's got 132 (yards) to the pin and it's over.' How sweet is that?"

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