

WMGA MATCH-PLAY GOLF

A sigh of relief for Aitken

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TENAFLY — Match play means never having to say you're sorry.

So when Montclair's Helen Aitken watched her lead begin to slip away Wednesday during the semifinals of the Women's Metropolitan Golf Association match-play championship at Knickerbocker Country Club, there were no apologies. Just a lot of mumbling, muttering, and wondering what could be done to control the damage.

Aitken, 49, was up three strokes against Robin Rombough, also of Montclair, heading into the 14th hole. A series of bad shots over the next three holes allowed Rombough to cut Aitken's lead to one heading to the 17th.

Although Aitken approached the tee with her confidence visibly shaken — wondering if she had given Rombough the match — she put her drive on the par-3 17th just on the back fringe. Aitken two-putted for par, exchanging the

mumbling and muttering for sighs of relief and a berth in today's 36-hole final.

Aitken, a 2 and 1 victor, will face Montclair's Maura Waters in the final. Waters defeated defending champion Lee Ann Vogel of Southward Ho, 2 and 1, to advance. The final is slated for 8 a.m.

"I was doing fine up until those last couple of holes," said Aitken, who will be making her first appearance in the finals after four trips to the semis. "I guess you could say that I was choking. I hit a bunker on 14 because of poor alignment. Then on 16 I saw Robin hit her second shot in the bunker by the green. I was behind a tree and should have just punched out and played it safe. I didn't, and it cost me because I had no second shot."

Aitken attempted to go over a pine tree on her second shot on the 16th, but hit a branch. Her shot dropped a few feet from the tree. Aitken compounded

the damage by duffing her next shot. The flubs cost her as Rombough won the hole and cut the lead to one.

Rombough's drive fell short of the green on 17, though, and Aitken was able to regain her composure for the victory.

"After that, I have to think about remaining calm and confident," Aitken said. "I had to get back to playing smart golf."

Waters and Aitken have faced each other twice before in tournament situations, with Waters winning both times. Waters, the men's golf coach at Rutgers, jostled with Vogel for most of the match before winning the 16th hole to go 2-up with two holes remaining. She and Vogel halved the 17th, giving Waters a chance at her first WMGA match-play title. Waters, the 1992 Women's State Amateur champ, was the match-play runner-up in 1988.

"I'm going to have to do a lot of

thinking about my swing before tomorrow," Waters said. "My mechanics aren't at their best right now. Mentally I'm in good shape, but I've been spraying a few drives all over the place this week."

"I've played with Helen a lot, but I have to approach this just as I would any other match-play event. I just have to play the course and make my pars and hope my mistakes don't turn into double bogeys. I'm confident heading into the final, though. I feel like I should win, but you should always feel that way in a tournament."

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Alpine's Helen Bernstein defeated Lynn Landou, also of Alpine, 8 and 6, in a Sanford Cup semifinal. She will face Newton's Diana D'Alessio, a 6 and 5 winner over Mary Holle of Essex County. The 18-hole match is scheduled to begin after the Championship Flight finalists tee off.