

British Blind Open **4 – 6 July 2005**

The British Blind Open is one of the “majors” hosted under the auspices of the International Blind Golf Association. The staging of the Open circulates between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with the latter being this year’s host. The Championship was held at the Massereene Golf Club, County Antrim (not far from the Belfast International airport). The course, founded in 1895, is a Parkland course, situated on the banks of Lough Neagh (Britain’s largest freshwater lake). The course is heavily wooded, with very punishing rough.

The number of entries to the Open was limited to a maximum of 50, with each participant having to have qualified based on performance in other events. Participants are divided into three sight categories, (B1 – totally blind, B2 – up to about 5% sight and B3 – up to about 10% sight). The B2 sight category saw the largest number of entrants, 28, this year.

On Monday 4th July the Pro-Am event included some local professionals, sponsors and other supporters. The weather was perfect, which we should have seen as an ominous sign, and the “scramble” format meant that we didn’t have to worry much about the rough, trees or water.

The Open started officially on the Tuesday morning, and boy was water something we had to worry about that day. Typical of what they describe as summer in Northern Ireland it rained, and rained, and rained. Fortunately the heavy rain was interspersed with light rain and drizzle. By the time we got as far as the 7th green the hole and much of the green were under water. Not surprisingly play was called off about an hour later. The back of the field had only completed 5 holes by that time, and as the weather did not improve that day it became necessary to expunge all scores and to hold the Championship over 18 holes the next day.

Some really good golf was played on the Wednesday as can be seen from the scores below, with several golfers managing to beat their handicaps on the very challenging par 72 layout. The top four gross scores in each category were as follows (with nett scores in brackets):

B1 Category (max. handicap 54)	B2 Category (max. handicap 45)	B3 Category (max. handicap 36)
David Morris 99 (67)	Garrett Slattery 90 (74)	Simon Cookson 78 (70)
Des Chandler 135 (83)	Jay Cookson 91 (72)	Mike Mayo 86 (71)
Ron Tomlinson 142 (89)	Sam Sloane 95 (72)	Ally Reid 92 (78)
Marion Koch 169 (121)	John Miller 100 (67)	Bill Hamilton 93 (71)

With the British Open Champion being decided on a Nett basis (unlike the SA Champion who is decided on gross) a play-off resulted between David Morris (a B1 from England) and John Miller (a B2 from Scotland). On the second extra hole the waters of Lough Neagh saw the sinking of John Miller, and David Morris was crowned champion. For a totally blind golfer to break 100 gross around such a challenging layout is quite an achievement. Mention needs to be made too of Simon Cookson who became the first visually impaired golfer to break 80 in the Open. A few years ago, when Simon had more sight, he played for his county in England, and although his sight may have worsened his swing is still superb.

It was a truly fantastic experience to be a part of this event, and I look forward to having the opportunity of participating in it again one day.

If anyone would like to find out more about golf for the visually impaired, please contact me at slattery@sun.ac.za or tel. (021)808-3248.

Garrett Slattery