

South African Blind Golf Association (SABGA)

IBGA World Championships & British Blind Open - 2010

Background

In August this year three players from the SABGA participated in the International Blind Golf Association's (IBGA) World Championships and British Blind Open, both staged at Whittlebury Park Golf Club, England. Both events were 36 hole stroke play competitions, with fields of 60 players from all around the world.

The three South African players (with their guides' names in brackets) were as follows:



*(Dean Harrison), Leon Strydom, Garrett Slattery, (Ken & Barbara Hignett)
Johan Kotze, (Tracy Kotze)*

Golf for the visually impaired is heavily reliant on the player's sighted guide. This person not only watches the golf ball, but assists the player with club selection and, crucially, alignment.

The Course

Whittlebury Park Golf & Country Club has a rich history, once forming part of the Royal Whittlewood Forest. Many of the mighty oak trees within the park have stood proud for more than a thousand years.

At the end of the 19th Century the park had a 9 hole golf course, but at the outset of World War One, landowners were encouraged to plough land in order to grow much needed crops, and the course was given up. In 1991 the course was reconstructed to become the 36 hole Championship Golf Course available today. The "1905" course was redeveloped based on information on the original course discovered at the library in St. Andrews. The "Grand Prix" course plays over the undulating grassland adjacent to the world famous Silverstone Motor Racing Circuit. With its interesting lake features and wildlife sanctuaries it provides many very testing holes.

If wayward shots are not held up in the semi-rough, players find themselves in knee-deep grass from which recovery is extremely difficult (when the ball can be found). Strong winds are common, and make the layout even more demanding.

The Pro-Am / Sponsor's Day

Prior to the tournaments there was a Pro-Am/Sponsor's Day, in which blind golfers teamed up with invited guests in an Alliance format. The event went well for the SA players, with Johan being in the winning 4-ball, and Garrett's 4-ball finishing third.

IBGA World Championships

This is the premier event in the IBGA golfing calendar, and takes place every two years. The golfers selected to participate in this event represented the cream of the crop when it comes to visually impaired golf worldwide. As in other Blind Golf events, competition is split into three sight categories: B1 (totally blind), B2 (low vision partially sighted) and B3 (partially sighted, with up to 10% vision).

After a very successful debut in the first World Championships in which SA players participated (in Northern Ireland, 2008), the South Africans were determined to do well again. They did not disappoint.

Challenging conditions on day 1 saw the first round leaders scoring net 71s. The best placed South African player was Garrett Slattery, who was 8 shots off the pace. A great second round by Garrett in which he scored a net 65 (the best round in the 2010 World Championships) brought him back to his handicap, and saw him finish as clubhouse leader with a total net score of 144. Some two hours after he finished though two players came in with net 142s pushing Garrett down to a third place finish overall.



Garrett with the IBGA World Championship 3rd Place Trophy

Jeremy Poincenot (USA), who played off a 3 handicap prior to suffering severe sight loss, was crowned as World Champion when he beat Simon Cookson (England) on the first play-off hole.

Following disappointing opening rounds Johan and Leon played in the Plate Event on the second day. Both players showed great improvement, and Johan marched to an emphatic victory following a round in which he scored 42 stableford points. Leon finished a very credible third.

The British Blind Open

The British Blind Open event saw a few of the golfers in the field come out of the starting blocks with all guns blazing. Two superb net 64s were carded, which almost put the event out of the reach of anyone else. Johan put together a great 69 net, which left him in 4th place overnight and still kept his chances alive.

The second round was played in the most challenging conditions of the week, with a strong wind blowing throughout the day, making the course very tough. Out early, Garrett posted a net 70 (which was not beaten the rest of the day), but as his opening round was a net 82 this was only able to lift him to an 8th place overall. He did though finish with the third best gross in the B2 category (and in the process finished ahead of the recently crowned B2 World Champion, Andy Sellars of England).

Johan battled the conditions manfully, and ended with a net 79 on day two, giving him an overall net of 148. With the two first round leaders continuing to perform well in the difficult conditions, Johan was not able to make up any ground on them. Nevertheless Johan held onto 4th place overall (net). Graham Coulton (Australia) took the title of British Open Champion with a 136 net total.

Leon played in the Plate event, and was extremely unfortunate not to win the event, eventually finishing in second place just one point behind the winner.



Leon, Garrett & Johan in their SA blazers

Well done to all three SABGA players and their guides. For all of the SA players' guides it was their first experience of international play and they all performed admirably. Ken & Barbara, newcomers to guiding, adapted very fast (and brought a wealth of local knowledge as both are members at Whittlebury).

Last, but by no means least, a huge thanks goes to the various sponsors without whose support none of this would have been possible.

Results

World Championships

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| Overall (Net) | 1. Jeremy Poincenot (USA), 142 2. Sinon Cookson (England), 142 3. Garrett Slattery (South Africa), 144 |
| B1 Gross | Zohar Sharon (Israel), 219 |
| B2 Gross | Andy Sellars (England), 178 |
| B3 Gross | Simon Cookson (England), 168 |
| Women | Ciara Pozzi (Italy), 205 |
| Plate Event | 1. Johan Kotze (South Africa) 2. K Koizuma (Japan) 3. Leon Strydom (South Africa) |

British Blind Open

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|----------------|--|
| Overall (Nett) | 1. Graham Coulton (Australia), 136 2. Barry Ritchie (England), 138 3. Wally Roode (Ireland), 138 4. Johan Kotze (South Africa), 148 |
| B1 Gross | Andrea Calcaterra (Italy), 218 |
| B2 Gross | 1. Pieta le Roux (England, ex. South Africa), 183 2. Jeremy Poincenot (USA) 3. Garrett Slattery (South Africa) |
| B3 Gross | John Eakin (England), 172 |
| Women Gross | Ciara Pozzi (Italy), 219 |
| Women Net | Jan Dinsdale (Northern Ireland), 150 |
| Plate Event: | 1. B McAllister 2. Leon Strydom (South Africa) |