

SOUTH AFRICAN BLIND GOLF ASSOCIATION (SABGA)

International Blind Golf Association (IBGA) ISPS Handa World Championships & Australian Blind Open - 2014

May 2014 saw Australia acting as the host nation for the highlight of the blind golfing calendar, the IBGA ISPS Handa World Championships. This prestigious event is staged every two years (the last one being in Canada in 2012) and brings together the best visually impaired golfers in the world to compete for the title of World Champion.

The event was held in the same week as the ISPS Handa Australian Open, and was staged at the demanding Nelson Bay Golf Club north of Sydney. A field of over 50 blind and visually impaired golfers from 13 countries was assembled for the events.

South Africa was represented at both events by Garrett Slattery (a member of the Stellenbosch Golf Club playing in his 4th World Championships) guided by his wife Cynthia, and Leon Strydom (a member of St. Catherine's playing in his 3rd World Championships) guided by his friend Alwyn Enslin. Alwyn was guiding Leon for the first time away from South Africa.



*Leon (left) and Garrett (right) joined by former South African
Willem Roode (now playing out of Ireland)*

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 Nelson Bay Course

The Nelson Bay golf course is a spectacular 27 hole Championship Course by the sea, set among a wide range of native trees with an abundance of wildlife including kangaroos, wallabies, koalas, snakes and native birds. The course is cut into the dense bush of a hilly nature reserve.



The downside of this for the golfer is that on most of the holes any shots that go more than a few metres off the fairway will invariably be in dense bush, and require a provisional ball. This, together with challenging greens and a very wet course following some heavy rain at the start of the week, contributed to some very high medal scores. Fortunately, however, the wind did not blow.

The Australian Open



Participating Players and Guides

Leon, playing in the B3 sight category (for players who see less than 6/60, i.e. who see less at 6m than a normal sighted person sees at 60m), opened with a 113 (net 82) which left him 10th place gross and 7th place net in the B3 category overnight. A slightly worse second day saw Leon slip a little, but finishing in a very credible 10th place net and 11th gross in the category.

Garrett, playing in the B2 sight category (for players who see less than 2/60, i.e. who see less at 2m than a normal sighted person sees at 60m), opened with a 110 (net 88) after a disastrous day in terms of losing balls in the bush, found himself in 5th place gross (9 shots off the pace) and 10th place net overnight. An improvement of 17 shots on the final day (scoring 93 net 71) saw Garrett shoot up the leaderboard to finish Runner-up gross (6 shots behind the pre-tournament favourite Jeremy Poincenot (USA) who plays off a 12 handicap and runner-up net (behind the overall net winner Kriss Adams (Scotland) playing off a 39).

The B1 sight category (for totally blind golfers) was won by the B1 World Champion, Zohar Sharon (Israel) with an excellent 36-hole gross of 217, three shots ahead of the talented Brian MacLeod (Canada).

The World Championships

The IBGA ISPS Handa World Championships is the premier event on the blind golf calendar, with access limited to the top visually impaired golfers from around the world.

Steady performance by Leon through the two days of the event saw him shoot rounds of 116 & 114 (net 85 & 83) which left him in a very good 10th position in the B3 sight category (gross & net). Were it not for two or three bad holes this position could have been even better, although everyone had those couple of holes which they wish they hadn't.

Garrett opened with a very good 95 (net 73) on the first day which left him tied with Inchan Cho (Korea) for the B2 gross lead. Rounds near the top of the leaderboard were in general poor on the final day. Garrett's 105 (net 83) proved to be good enough to give him a 4-shot victory and the B2 World Title (and Runner-up net). This is the best achievement to date by a member of the SA Blind Golf Association in an international event.

Garrett had the added pleasure of winning a gold-plated putter for the achievement of having the least number of putts (across all sight categories) during the World Championships.

The B1 (totally blind) category was won by Zohar Sharon (Israel), who was the only one of the 3 sight category World Champions who successfully defended his title. He finished 7 shots ahead of Andrea Calcaterra (Italy).



Garrett with the B2 World Championship Trophy and Golden Putter Award

For anyone who would like to find out a little more about blind golf and the World Championships you can watch “The Golf Show” from Fox Sports which can be downloaded from:

<http://pesjc.macmate.me/public/ffe882b9d8544cea4ecc2551c4c8dae3>

The next IBGA World Championships will take place in Japan in 2016.