



"Challenge International" - La Grande Motte : 28/30 April 2006

Hard on the heels of the successful "World Cup" held in Teià, Barcelona last month, (www.pitchandputtWC2006.com), international Pitch & Putt took another major step forward last week-end in La Grande Motte, France with the 6th "Challenge International de La Grande Motte". This competition has now become one of the main attractions on the EPPA fixture list and the organizer, Christian Auzière, the AFPP team coach, succeeded in attracting a star-studded field of ninety players from nine European countries for three days of top class competition and fun.



James Carroll, Edvard Hatle, Alan Hanlon

The sun shone throughout the competition, no doubt to highlight the remarkable skills of these exponents of the short game and Isabelle, the green keeper, had kept her staff hard at work in order to prepare a course worthy of such competitors. She certainly produced an arena that did justice to the presence of : a defending champion, a winner from four years ago, a member of the victorious World Cup team, a former national champion, and eighteen players who have represented their respective countries in international events. Pre-competition forecasts included any of a dozen names.

The warm sun was tempered by a chilly wind; the greens rolled true and not too fast; and the pin positions were not too demanding – at least on Saturday. The defending champion came out with both wedges blazing and fired a warning round of 50 which no-one else could match; at least in the morning. Two serious contenders emerged during the afternoon round in the shape of two students, perhaps inspired by the recent bout of protests by their French peers. James Carroll is president of a students' union in Ireland and Edvard Hatle is a student in Norway, after graduating from an American high school in South Carolina. Their respective rounds of 49 and 50 really put them into contention. Marc Fortuny of Catalonia and Anthony Kavanagh from Ireland were not far behind after their 51's and nor was Ian Farrelly, the current holder of the San Marino title, who was to be one of the rare signatories of three sub-par rounds. David Solé, a member of the victorious Catalan team in Teià could only manage even par for the first two rounds.

On Saturday evening, during the "Camarguais" dinner organised by our Novotel sponsor, many of the participants showed that there are other good things in life than just Pitch & Putt by revealing all sorts of hidden talents : Rob and Bert gave us a glimpse of the Dutch version of Flamenco; Pilar then provided a superb demonstration of the real thing; Alan grabbed a guitar and got the whole house vibrating, accompanied on the spoons by Ger Casserly, star of Coco TV's "House hunters in the Sun" series and future Pitch & Putt course owner in France. A good time was had by all.

But on Sunday morning, it was back to business and the poor scorers of the eve had an early and chilly start. When, in the final count, an undisputed star like Pilar Montero finishes 30th, you had to shoot really low to get the benefit of a lie-in and a late breakfast! The only ace of the whole competition was provided by Bob Lovell from Britain and the bogeys, doubles, trebles, and even worse were all too easy to come by. Alan was obviously still glowing from his Saturday night

fever, as he again got off to a remarkable start with two birdies in the first four holes, only marred by a slightly clumsy bogey at the second. James stayed in front with a string of steady pars, but it was never going to be easy, especially as the younger Hatle, playing one hole in front, was doing even better than in the previous afternoon session.

Brother Edvard had the honours on the 17th tee and knew he needed at least one more birdie to catch James, who had parred the last seven holes. Was he over-ambitious? Was it home straight pressure? Was he tired after the trip to Montpellier on Friday from Sweden, where he and his brother had helped white-wash the Swedes in an epic international victory for the Norwegian amateur golf team? Whatever it was, he hit his worst shot of the tournament and flopped into the water hazard – twice! He was out of contention.

A few metres away, on the 18th tee, William must surely have witnessed his brother's distress. Was he also tired or nervous or over-ambitious? Maybe it was just brotherly sympathy, because he hit exactly the same shot and dropped into the rough on the slope leading up to the very difficult eighteenth green. His chances also seemed to be slipping away.

Meanwhile, the drama was unfolding back on the seventeenth, where James could only manage a par. I was standing next to Liz Quinn who had come in from a fine round which had secured her the "first lady" trophy and she definitely seemed to be rooting for the defending champion, who was stalking a very makeable birdie putt. I have seen Alan sink important putts on this very green so many times in the past that I was sure he would make it. He too, as he struck it perfectly; only to watch it slow and hang on the edge. Shades of 2003 when he lost the play-off here to Stephen O'Leary The tension was palpable and Liz spun away in disappointment.

We were snatched from our reverie by a roar from the neighbouring green, saluting a magnificent chip shot from William, which put him level with James on seven under. However, the pin took exception to being hammered in this way and the roar turned to a groan as the ball dragged itself back out onto the lip. Funny old game, isn't it?

But Alan could still catch James and he hit one of the best shots to have been fired at this hole in the last two days, leaving himself an uphill five-footer. James was a little long, in the short rough just off the fringe. He had missed chances galore to sew it up earlier in the round but this time he showed his true mettle by striking it firmly into the centre of the hole, for his only birdie on the back nine. A true champion. Alan again left his putt short but this only meant that he had to share second place with William rather than finish outright second on his own. No big deal.

As for the Catalan players, they had the consolation of three top tens and fifteen players in the top thirty. They tell me they will be back! At the closing ceremony, Madame Berger, representing the mayor of La Grande Motte, thanked and congratulated the players and expressed her wish to see them all again next year. The city is preparing to apply to FIPPA with a proposal to organise the 2008 World Cup, as they really believe in the potential of Pitch & Putt as a top class competitive sport.



Alain Hanlon, Wilfram Hurlot, Sylvain Tirfort, Eric Dürr

On Friday evening the "John Hudson Challenge" scramble event gave our sponsors - Florabora, Heineken, Novotel Accor, Ricard, Vignobles Jean Jean et Vincent Golf – the opportunity to taste the joys of Pitch & Putt. Alan Hanlon's team took the trophy with an impressive 9 under par !

Thanks again to all of you and – see you in Florence ! Or in San Marino ! Or in Rome . . .

La Grande Motte - 1 May 2006