



A bird's eye view of the Natadola Bay Championship Golf Course.



Golf course overlooking the Coral Coast.



Vijay in conversation at the teebox.

BY JACKIE TEO BATTLEING BHULLAR IS DESERVING CHAMP AT NATADOLA BAY

eld at the Natadola Bay Championship Golf Course, the Fiji International presented by Fiji Airways ended with India's Gaganjeet Bhullar capturing his first

title of the year after a spectacular final round score of six-under 66.

An audacious chip-in on the 17th for an eagle proved to be the catalyst for his eventual victory as he overtook the field to head into the final hole with a one stroke lead.

At the par-four 18th, all that was needed was two putts for par to win this US\$925,780 event tri-sanctioned by the European Tour, ISPS HANDA PGA Tour of Australasia and Asian Tour.

With this, Bhullar obtained his ninth Asian Tour title; the most of any Indian player past or present.

In a well-contested match that saw the lead change hands midway, Bhullar's opening 70 began what was to be a showcase in consistency, despite trying conditions on the par 72, 6,575-metre long golf course.

With winds billowing from the adjacent Coral Coast, the Indian 30-year-old came into contention after a 69 in the second round, where only 12 players managed to break 70.

In the third round, that same

score pushed him to top spot. His three-under-par 69 was the best score on Saturday, with only five other players carding similar scores.

Staring close behind was Australian Ben Campbell, whose opening rounds of 67 and 66 gave him the outright lead previously but then crumbled with a five-over-par 77 on moving day.

Full of confidence, Bhullar started the final round with a blistering start.

"It was a tough day. It was windy, flags were tough, but I played really well. The key was I got on to a really good start, I was three under after four holes and I think that kept me going," said the Indian ace who jumped to fourth on the Asian Tour's Habitat for Humanity standings after this victory.

"And just around the turn, things were actually getting a little tough for me, but I think I managed to make a really good par save on number 10. That gave me a lot of boost, a

lot of confidence.

"That chip in on 17, that pretty much closed the deal. I had a little bit of an idea that this chip is going to run a lot, but it wasn't an easy chip, I could have easily missed up-and-down and settled for second or third," reflected Bhullar.

While it was a well deserved victory for the 30-year-old Indian, the performance of the day belonged to Australian Anthony Quayle. Paired together with four-time Major champion, Ernie Els, Quayle dismantled the course with a nine-under-par 63; a course record which includes a 29 on the back nine. The previous record of 64 was held by Thai wonderkid Jazz Janewattanond, coincidentally also at the final round of last year's event.

His back-nine blitz began on the 11th where he birdied the par-five hole. Then at the short 288-metre par-four 12th, he drove the green and converted his 18-footer for eagle.

Quayle followed up with back to back birdies on the 13th and 14th before making a spectacular eagle on the 17th to come back as clubhouse leader albeit momentarily.

"That was pretty awesome out there. I got to play with Ernie and played a pretty awesome back nine there. I'm pretty happy with it regardless of the finish. I was just saying I struggled to kind of comprehend I was playing with Ernie. I'm at a loss for words at the moment, it hasn't sunk in. It was a great round and it was cool to do it in front of him." Quayle added.

His playing partner Els, had nothing but praises for the young Queenslander.

"I did almost as much as I could.

I set out to try to shoot 65, which I did, and Anthony just played unbelievable," said the 48-year-old South African.

"Jeez, what is it, 29 on the back nine? That's unbelievable stuff. Great golf and well deserved. He's got a great game, great attitude. He's got the whole package. He hits it long, he's got great touch, and under the gun he really brought his stuff. He was off the fairways a lot, but he kept hanging in there. And to shoot 29 on the back nine is incredible." Els added.

The 'Big Easy' himself played brilliant golf through the howling gales on the course, in fact this was his first made cut in his nine previous Tour events.

Tournament host and local hero Vijay Singh improved with every round scores of 76, 72, 71 and 68. Dour at the start, good humour finally prevailed with the former world No. 1 commenting at the end of the fourth round that he finally "beat the course".

Vijay (below) himself designed the Championship Course at Natadola Bay in 2009 and oversaw major renovations ahead of the 2017 event to include wider fairways, flatter greens and an altogether modern and finely trimmed track.



SELECTED SCORES

274: Gaganjeet Bhullar 70-69-69-66
275: Anthony Quayle 75-66-71-63
276: Ernie Els 72-70-69-65, Ben Campbell 67-66-77-66
278: Jarryd Felton 67-71-71-69
280: Poom Saksansin 73-68-71-68, Andrew Dodt 67-70-72-71, Jake McLeod 72-67-70-71