

## Phatlum in line for back-to-back victories; Simi stays top Indian

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Aggressive Phatlum Pornanong of Thailand flew on the wings of a stunning eagle to keep her top spot intact with one more round to go in the second round of the DLF Women's Indian Open on Thursday.

The 18-year-old girl from Chiang Mai shot a second successive two-under 70 to go four-under for the tournament and lead by two over World Cupper Wang Chun of China, who finished with a brilliant run of four birdies on last four holes during her 69. Wang Chun's 69 is the best card so far in the tournament and she is now two-under 142 following her first round of 73.

Japan's Yuki Sakurai, who also shot a two-under 70, is third at two-under 142.

With only three players having sub-par totals, Shih Huei-Ju of Chinese Taipei was fourth at even par 144 with a second straight round of 72. After Yeo Jin Kang of Korea pulled out, 61 players including 12 amateurs, stayed in fray for the final day.

Smriti Mehra continued to be the best Indian in the field with a round of one-over 73 that gave her a two-round aggregate of two-over 146 in sole eighth place.

Irina Brar, India's best hope after Smriti, was hit by the recurrence of a back injury that saw her dropped five shots on last four holes to come in with a 81 that gave her a two-day total of 13-over 157. "I could hardly bend to putt today," said a disappointed Irina.

"I was happy with my putting today. But I will have to work even harder to stay in contention and will go all out tomorrow," said Smriti, who finished tenth at the Thailand Ladies Open earlier in the season.

Tanya Wadhwa made the upward move with a round of 75 that took her to tied 21st place. Kiran Mathru was tied 24 after a round of five over 77 today. She had a round of 76 yesterday.

There was a second hole-in-one, as another Chinese Taipei pro Chen Kuan-Pei aced the 187-yard par 3 16th hole. Chen, the 23-year-old, who lists sleeping as her hobby, shot a second round of 72 to be three-over 147.

Chen was the second player to log an ace and even more interestingly, the duo also share a room at the hotel. The pair will now share the Rs. 50,000 put up by Sudhir Gensets as the reward for an ace.

Phatlum may well have gone further ahead but for a bogey on the closing hole 18th, where she missed a par put after getting into the greenside hazard. "I was trying for a birdie and got a bogey," said Phatlum with a smile. "But I am still happy."

Looking for is looking for back-to-back wins following her success at the Thailand Ladies Open five weeks ago in Bangkok, the shy and unassuming Phatlum attacked the golf course. "I like to play for birdies," said Phatlum in halting English. She packs a lot of power and hits the ball beyond 250 yards despite a small and frail look. "I like this course and the conditions are excellent," said Pornanong, who is planning to give the US LPGA Qualifying School a shot at the end of this year. "I am also trying to work on my strength."

Pornanong won the Hong Kong Ladies Masters back in 2006 while still being an amateur, which meant she could not get the \$ 12,000 winner's cheque. After turning professional in early 2007, she won her first pro title this year when she dominated the field at the season-opener, Thailand Ladies Open.

"That was a good win and I hope to carry on," added Phatlum. Playing at the same course last year, Phatlum had slipped on the final day. Lying 12th after two rounds, she lapsed early with a quadruple bogey and never recovered to shoot 82 and finish 30th. "That is history, I don't think about it," she says.

In the year since last Indian Open, Phatlum has matured a lot. From just two birdies in three rounds in 2007, she has 11 birdies and an eagle in just two rounds.

On the second day, Phatlum started with a bogey but quickly recovered with two birdies on 12th and 14th and then added two more on first and second to go three-under. But a lapse in concentration a missed par putt saw her shoot back to back bogeys on third and fourth.

However the gritty but smiling Phatlum soon hit back with a great drive and followed that with a superb 5-Wood second shot to land within 15 feet and she duly nailed the eagle much to her delight to go again go three-under for the day. But the bogey on the ninth saw her end the day with a 70 and go to four-under for he tournament.

Wang Chun, who played the 2007 World Cup for China, started on the tenth with a birdie but then bogeyed 11th and 12th and then had a birdie on 14th. But bogeys on 17th and 18th meant she turned in two-over.

On the second nine, the front half of the course, Wang birdied the first and then parred the next four. Then she went on a birdie spree with four in a row from sixth to ninth to end with a 69.

Sakurai, 19, who has become very popular in golf-crazy Japan is just two behind Phatlum. "I am going to go all out for the win. I'm here on a mission and I have big ambitions and I've started working to achieve the objectives that I have set myself," said Sakurai earlier. "I am going to aim for a five-under on final day," she said.

Sakurai, who is playing on the Japan Ladies Tour and the Ladies European Tour is trying to gain as much tournament experience as possible. This year in January, Sakurai started the 2008 season with a bang when she finished fifth in the Women's Australian Open. A week later she finished 44th in a high quality field at the ANZ Ladies Masters.

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