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Winners battled strong winds at Saunton

Final call

The last Regional Finals of 2008 took place at four courses steeped in history.

With the Volkswagen Golf Masters UK final only two months away, competitors battled it out for the last nine spots at Turnberry. There were nerves and excitement at four Regional Finals where competitors were treated like professionals for the day.

Saunton

Held on the Friday of this year's Open Championship, the golfing gods threw the same weather at the north Devon coastline that had caused the world's top professionals so much trouble the previous morning at Royal Birkdale: blustery and occasionally strong winds, and squally rain.

The Herbert Fowler-designed course runs through, and is surrounded by, some of the most beautiful and dramatic sand dunes, and is where a young Sergio Garcia won the British Boys' Championship 11 years ago.

In the low handicap group, a sign of the difficult conditions was that the low handicapper in the field, playing off just 2, shot a 94! In second place, and unfortunately for him just losing out on a count-back, was Downes Crediton member, Gary Greenwood. The winner, with a nett 76 playing off a handicap of 5, was Jonathan Behannah from St. Mellion in Cornwall. Jonathan ascribed his success to a good back nine where he played "the more penetrating and punchy shots which you need for these conditions".

In Group B, Ian Parfitt had made the long journey from Hamptworth Golf Club on the edge of the New Forest, and he was rewarded with a landslide win. His nett 73 playing off 18 gave him a resounding nine-shot victory over John Garner from Dartmouth. Not only had Ian never played at Saunton before, he had not actually even played links golf!

Group C is played as a Stableford competition, and was won by Dean

Sampson from the host club, who plays off 22. Only playing for a couple of years, he confessed to having been very nervous, but his tally of 30pts was enough to hold off Alastair Ross from Wrangaton with 28pts.

Notts

Notts is yet another *Golf Monthly* Top 100 course which has been added onto the Volkswagen Masters Regional Final rota. With narrow, sweeping fairways and extremely difficult approach shots it is one of the toughest inland courses in the UK.

The golf club was formed in 1887 and the 18-hole layout known as Hollinwell opened in 1900. The course rises up from the clubhouse to a wonderful backdrop of bracken, while heather and gorse protect the intimidating fairways. The holes are spread over an ever-changing landscape but the course still manages to maintain a heathland feel throughout.

As expected, competitors found the course extremely challenging, and with the wind blowing, it was no surprise that a Hollinwell member came out on top. Plus one handicapper Rob Sallis produced a round of 69 gross to comfortably win group A.

"I was pleased to see the wind blow this morning, it gave me an advantage as I know the course so well," said Sallis.

Tapton Park member Ian Boler finished second with a round of nett 73 while defending UK Champion Sam Foster was 3rd. An excellent score of nett 71 off a handicap of 11 gave Colin Wragg a place in the UK Final. The Beeston Fields member claimed Group B by five shots after Darren James shot a nett 76 with a 10 on his card.

Group C was won by last year's UK finalist Shane Smith. The 19-handicapper had been out for three months with an injury and had only played his return game a week before the Midlands Final.

"I only hit one fairway today but my short game was good, I had no three putts," said Smith.

Hexham

A beautiful sweeping par 5, which falls from the tee to the fairway and rises once again to the green, greeted competitors at the penultimate Regional Final. The first hole at Hexham Golf Club in Northumberland is a stunner and from then on the layout constantly changes direction and elevation with a different challenge on every hole.

The superb conditions helped to produce impressive scoring with all three winners scoring well below par to secure their spot. Slaley Hall member Jeff Lightle took Group A with a round of nett 67 playing of a handicap of 7. Craig Wright of Bellingham and Dunstanburgh member Martin Carss both finished with impressive rounds of 68, with Wright taking second place.

Group B was won with the score of the day, a nett 66. David Murray used eight years of experience at Hexham to produce the fantastic score off a 10 handicap.

"I birdied the 1st, which is always a bonus at Hexham, and played well from there," said David.

Stephen Barnes of Keswick finished four shots behind to end up in second place and 18-handicapper John Richardson finished one shot further back.

Another excellent score was produced in Group C, this time by Steve Lowther of Blyth Golf Club. The 19-handicapper managed 39pts to secure his place at Turnberry. Fellow Blyth member Fenwick Henson finished second with 37 Stableford points.

Royal Porthcawl

With just three places remaining in the UK Final, 42 competitors were treated to a wonderful day at Royal Porthcawl for the last Regional Final of 2008. The fantastic links in South Wales completed a world-class list of courses which have hosted this year's Regional Finals. Porthcawl oozes history and is a fine representation of a classic seaside layout.

The course constantly changes direction which means the strong winds from the Atlantic Ocean make shot shaping and control the key attributes to scoring well. As with many of the classic links courses, bunker placement at Porthcawl is not far from perfect. Pot bunkers severely punish any wayward approach shots and, as many competitors found out, even on a relatively calm day the course is a tough test.

With a trip to Turnberry at stake the pressure was on and St Pierre member Arnie Pidgeon thought his challenge was over early on when he dropped four shots in the first four holes. The 5-handicapper fought back brilliantly though and was two under par on the back nine, which was good enough to take victory in Group A. Ian Edwards of Neath Golf Club was unlucky not to qualify, losing out on a count-back after a magnificent round playing off one.

Geraint Evans from Pyle and Kenfig managed to overcome adversity to claim victory in Group B. The 12-handicapper is scheduled to have knee surgery in two weeks' time and after his superb round of nett 72 faces a fight to be fit for September's UK Final.

After taking six to escape one of Porthcawl's intimidating bunkers, Tenby's David Henry thought he had blown his chances of victory. He battled on brilliantly and finished with 34 Stableford points which gave him victory in Group C.



Royal Porthcawl: a magnificent setting



One of Notts' many intimidating holes



Rob Sallis on his way to victory at Notts

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