



PRESS RELEASE

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TOP-RANKED KOEPKA COMMITS TO PLAY IN THE 2020 HONDA CLASSIC

PALM BEACH GARDENS, FL -- If there's a tournament that closely resembles the majors, it's The Honda Classic at PGA National Resort & Spa.

The 40th edition of The Honda Classic reinforced that notion when rising star Sungjay Im won at 6-under par 274 on the Champion Course.

That's right, 6-under. At most PGA Tour events, a player shoots 6-under on nine holes.

Not on the par-70 Champion Course, where players are tested from the opening tee to the dreaded Bear Trap (holes 15, 16 and 17). With water in play on almost every hole, a double- or triple-bogey -- or worse -- is just an errant shot away.

And the Bermuda rough wasn't even its normal length this year, the PGA Tour staff lowering it from its usual 2 ½ inches to 2 inches. Not that it made things easier.

"It's as mentally tough a golf course as we see all year," said Gary Woodland, who should know: He won last year's U.S. Open, which is regarded as the most difficult test in golf.

"Obviously it shows where your game is," Woodland said of the Champion Course at PGA National. "You need everything."

"The difficulty of the course certainly seems like a major," said Brandon Steele, who led after 36 holes and finished tied for fourth place.

This is no putting contest, to be sure, although the new greens built by PGA National's new owners last year were pure.

"You've always got to be on your guard," said Lee Westwood, who tied for fourth in his attempt to become the oldest (46) winner of The Honda Classic.

"It can bite you pretty quickly, this place," said former world No. 1 Luke Donald, who tied for 11th. "You've got to play smart and aggressive when you get the chance."

"Par is your friend out there," Tommy Fleetwood said. "Doesn't matter what holes they are. No matter what's going on on the leaderboard, you have to know that par is a very, very good score, and just keep playing."

Fleetwood was in great position to win his first PGA Tour title, especially after he birdied his first two holes Sunday to take a two-shot lead at 7-under. But the Englishman played his last 13 holes in 3-over and finished in third, shot shots behind Im.

The average winning score on the PGA Tour through this season's first 20 events was 18.2 under par, but no player got lower than 7-under all week at the Honda. The average winning score in the 14 times Honda has been held at PGA National is 8.7-under par.

That's very major-like.

The Jack Nicklaus-redesign played to a stroke average of almost two shots over par for the week (71.92). Once again, the Champion Course will rank as one of the toughest on the PGA Tour – tougher than even some of the majors. Only 16 players broke par.

"This is a course where you have to take what it gives you," Nicklaus said during the final-round telecast. "You have to play your game and let others make mistakes."

Especially at the Bear Trap, which has ranked as the third-toughest three-hole stretch on the PGA Tour since the Honda moved to PGA National in 2007. Players faced favorable north winds at the Bear Trap during the first three rounds, but a shift to the east brought out its fangs in the final round.

For the week, the par-3 15th was the fourth-toughest (3.29), the par-4 16th the fifth-toughest (4.24) and the 17th the 11th-toughest (3.12).

“I never dreamed that these holes were going to play so difficult come down the stretch,” Nicklaus said. “If you’re going to have a Bear Trap, you might as well have a nice trap.”

Michael Thompson, the 2013 Honda winner, and Jim Furyk had played the most rounds without hitting a ball in the water at the Bear Trap – 28 and 14, respectively. Alas, both found the water to end those streaks.

Im won the Honda because he made birdies on the 15th and 17th holes. After Mackenzie Hughes made a 54-footer on No. 17 to tie Im for the lead, Im responded by making an 8-foot birdie to take the lead for good.

“It was like man versus machine,” said Hughes, who played alongside Im. “I’m the man, hitting shots in bunkers and hitting the grandstands on 18, and he’s just like a machine. He honestly hit two incredible shots into 15 and 17, and he’s very, very deserving, obviously, of winning.”

Im may not be a household name, but the 21-year-old South Korean is an emerging star. He went 3-1-1 playing for the International team in last year’s Presidents Cup and his first PGA Tour win moved him from 34th to 25th in the world rankings.

Im is one of only two players to win the Korn Ferry Tour Player of the Year and follow that up with PGA Tour Rookie of the Year (Stewart Cink is the other). Im already has what top players like Fleetwood don’t – a PGA Tour title.

“Even after winning Rookie of the Year, I really wanted to get that win,” Im said. “Had a few good chances that slipped away, but I’m very grateful that I could win at such a young age. To have it happen as fast as it did, I’m very happy and satisfied.”

Im left PGA National with the trophy, but it was the Champion Course that proved to be the biggest winner.

Once again.