

Vani takes sole lead, four Indians in top-10 on Day 1

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GURUGRAM: Vani Kapoor emerged as a surprise leader while three other Indians finished inside top-10 on the sun-soaked opening day of the Hero Women's Indian Open (HWIO) at DLF Golf and Country Club on Thursday. Vani, who was tied third on the same course two weeks back in the domestic Women's Pro Golf Tour (WPGT), made full use of familiar conditions and carded a five-under (67) to take the opening day honours.

Compatriot and amateur Zara Anand, fresh from a playoff loss here last month in WPGT, shared the second spot with Singapore's Shannon Tan and Germany's Verena Gimmy, each shooting four-under.

Having copped some criticism last year for extra hard playing conditions, the course this time, as far as early impressions go, is far more palatable. An extended monsoon did play a part in slowing down the roll, but the decision to go a little easy on the trimmer was a conscious one. Resultantly, a number of players spoke of better ball control and extracting better value for their strokes.

The difference was visible on the leaderboard as well, with Vani dropping just one shot against six birdies, three on each nine. Teeing off from the first hole, Vani began her tournament with a birdie but dropped a shot on the very next hole. Birdies on par 3 fifth and par 4 ninth meant



Vani Kapoor in action at the Hero Women's Indian Open.

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she entered the second half with a two-shot advantage. She then drained birdies on the 11th, 12th, and 13th holes and parred the rest to run away to solo lead.

In the 16 past editions of HWIO, only twice has an Indian led at the end of Day 1. The first occasion was in 2007 when amateur Meghna Bal topped the field after the first round and the other instance was in 2012 when Aditi Ashok shared the top honours at the close of opening day's play.

"I enjoyed myself, took one shot at a time and played each shot to its merit. I looked inwards as to how well I hit a shot and was not too concerned about the bounce and where it went, Vani said. The 31-year-old has had an indifferent season on the Ladies European Tour (LET) even though she sits comfortably atop the domestic Order of Merit

with four wins.

With just one top-10 finish from six starts, Vani's last two outings on LET ended in a T-68 at VP Bank Swiss Ladies Open and a T-91 at La Sella Open. On her home turf though, she showed no signs of struggle. "The course is nice and different from last year but challenging, as always. The rough is up, the greens are nice and playing at a good speed. There's better ball control. You need some luck on this course because you can hit a good shot but still get penalised here," she noted.

Amateur Zara, 17, impressed with her audacious strokeplay, trading three bogeys with seven birdies to share the second spot. "Rain has made the course better, but this is DLF and here every hole is different, every day is different. The key is in staying in the present," she said.