

Local girl Vani in front

Moushumi.Bora@timesofindia.com

Gurugram: "Stay within limits!" Kapoor chided herself after her bogey on the second hole. After years and years of churning out rounds on this challenging course, there have been many lessons learnt. Despite the setup and softer conditions in the morning, aggression would be rarely rewarded.

"I just used a wrong club, a little bit of adrenaline rush after the birdie on the first. I learnt from that," Vani explained later.

Page turned, she reeled in five more birdies and holed steady pars on the final five holes to build up home hopes with an opening five-under 67 at the \$500,000 Hero Women's Indian Open.

When did she turn 31? Still bubbly and confident, Vani's journey of playing 87 tournaments on the Ladies European Tour over the years has perhaps kept expectations in check. "DLF was my friend today, so I hope it continues to be so. It's time for an Indian to win, you do need some luck on this course," she mused.

Promising amateur Zara Anand, who lay one stroke behind the leaders in tied-second place, lost in a playoff at DLF on the domestic tour just two weeks ago. FYI, Vani finished tied-third then.

"It was a great experience for me to play with the pros," said the 17-year-old Zara, who had honed her skills at Greater Noida's Jaypee Greens under the watchful

eyes of former player Amit Dube. Soon, it will sweet home Alabama, as she heads to Auburn University in the US "to continue (her) academic and athletic career."

With Dube on the bag, Zara's opening mark was by design. "I'm just sticking to the slots that we marked out in the practice rounds," said the Grade XII student, who was lapping up her psychology theories online, using it practically to full effect.

Bengaluru's Durga Nittur and local Hitaashee Bakshi made it four Indian golfers in the top-6-and-tied places. Durga kept her nerves in an up-and-down round for her two-under while Hitaashee picked up two birdies on the back for an identical score.

Singapore's Shannon Tan, who was chasing Order of Merit honours, got her visa late on Tuesday but made the most of her time with quick practice. Tied with Zara, the European No. 2 has the ability and knowledge to tackle the course, having come joint-second last season.

Mimi Rhodes, the No. 1, made rough work of her initiation. She dropped five bogeys, salvaging a birdie for a four-over round that placed her tied-57th.

First round leaderboard: -5 Vani Kapoor (Ind); -4 Zara Anand (Ind-am), Shannon Tan (Sin), Verena Gimmy (Ger); -3 Alice Hewson (Eng); -2 Durga Nittur (IND), Romy Meekers (Ned), Hitaashee Bakshi (Ind), Sara Kouskova (Cze), Alessia Nobilo (Ita).



VANI

**WOMEN'S
INDIAN OPEN**