

Hitaashee extends lead, five Indians in top 10 after Rd 3

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GURUGRAM: Hitaashee Bakshi reeled off a third under-par score on her home course to retain sole lead going into the final day of the \$500,000 Hero Women's Indian Open at the DLF Golf and Country Club here. Her three-shot lead and consistency this week raises strong hopes of an Indian winning the national tournament for only the second time.

Home golfers continued to make an impression with five of them in the top-10 on Saturday.

The 21-year-old leader fired a two-under 70 to be nine-under for the tournament. Hitaashee held a three-shot lead over England's Alice Hewson, whose 3-under 69 took her six places up to solo second. Pranavi Urs, who followed her 67 on Friday with a 73, was solo third.

Hitaashee, fresh from a bogey-free 67 on Friday, made three birdies each on the front and back nine on what she described as a "funny" day at work. That the greens played true did help, but Hitaashee's solid performance is largely down to her preparation and mental reserves. Almost every time she dropped a shot, the youngster found a birdie, ensuring that she maintained her lead.

"I just went one shot at a time. It's my home course, so there is no pressure. I just went out and played," the 2024 Order of Merit winner in the WGAI Tour said.



Hitaashee Bakshi.

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Hitaashee improved her one-shot overnight lead with a strong start as she birdied the first and the par-3 fifth. A double bogey on the seventh was but a stumble as she reeled off birdies on the 9th, 10th and 12th holes.

"The seventh hole was a 92-yard shot from the middle of the fairway and I chunked it... Then there was a 40-yard chip, and again I chunked it and that was a double bogey. But I really held my calm from the seventh green to the eighth tee," she said.

The 14th hole proved to be a major hurdle with seven of the top 10 dropping a shot or more. The longest par-4 on the course

demands the approach shots to be towards the left of the green, as the contours tend to feed the ball into the centre. "The 14th was a bogey. I ended up being in the bush on the left side. I didn't really hit a good shot. From the bush, I just chipped out and made a bogey," she said.

Her chip for par on the 18th summed up her form and focus. Having hit the approach into the rough, Hitaashee took her time to choose her wedge, found her footing in the bunker, and then nailed a three-foot chip. "On 18, I just told my caddie, we were going to bogey, which would have been fine with me. Else, I will give myself a chance for a par putt and my chip landed well. It's been such a long day and the last few holes I was making birdie-bogey-birdie-bogey, so for me it was difficult to know if I was still leading or not," she said.

If Hitaashee wins on Sunday, she will be the first Indian to win since Aditi Ashok in 2016. "I love crowds, it's so nice to see them coming out here and giving time to my game. I'm very excited going into tomorrow. I think I'll sleep well tonight. Nine is a very lucky number in India, so let's do it," she added.

Day 3 leaderboard (top 5 only): 1. Hitaashee Bakshi (IND) -9 (70, 67, 70); 2. Alice Hewson (ENG) -6 (69, 72, 69); 3. Pranavi Urs (IND) -4 (72, 67, 73); 4. Avani Prashanth (IND) -2 (73, 71, 70); 4. Kelsey Bennett (AUS) -2 (71, 71, 72), 4. Shannon Tan (SGP) -2 (68, 73, 73).