Vani makes herself heard but Phatlum has last word

Indian Finishes Second As Thai Invitee Makes It Four

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Gurugram: The autumn leaves were falling on the vantage point, where many had gathered for a glimpse of the ninth hole at DLF G&CC. Overnight leader Vani Kapoor's rousing birdie on the eighth kept her one ahead of the experienced Thai, Pornanong Phatlum, already a three-time winner at the venue, although on the old Arnold Palmer-designed layout.

People could sense a turning point as the LPGA golfer collected her fifth birdie of the day. The home pro stood over her small pressure putt, studying the lines over and over again, taking a step backwards, playing it in her mind, then attempting again. Finally she hit, it was a miss!

A leaf fell again on the shoulder. Was it nature's way of saying that the hopes had withered too? The spectators remained still, in disbelief, then politely clapped in admiration as the calm Thai caught up with the home challenger.

Maybe that elusive Hero Women's Indian Open trophy had slipped out of our hands again.

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THAI HIGH: Thailand's Pornanong Phatlum with the trophy on Sunday

Onto the par-4 10th, and Vani's second shot was short, and her wedge failed to find the right spot on the green. As Phatlum settled for her two-putt par, Vani's putter missed the target again for a bogey. The narrative had changed.

This is the club where Vani, a star student of the DLF Academy, had grown up. A casual walk here would often lead to one bumping into the little confident girl whose dreams were big. Older now at 32, her expectations were now tempered with a sprinkling of reality. But despite all the disappointments home and away, she carried on with a happy demeanour.

In golf, you could be second but you were still a winner but only one could walk away with the prize, and that person needed a little bit of luck, she had said before.

The stumbles on the back-nine ensured that Vani came second. Yes, she was still a winner. But champion Phatlum made her own luck. When the Indian came out, all irons blazing, with four birdies in five holes, the Thai managed three of her own, adding two more before the turn.

Pars can be powerful if you are ahead, and others are not making their moves. Phatlum was creating her own new chapter with two more birdies after the lull under the strong afternoon sun for a final-day bogey-free seven-under 65, and a magical fourth triumph by four strokes.

Vani quietly accepted her lot with her round of 70. "I think this year I was much more confident, and more anchored. I had a sense of purpose," she shared her positive notes.

But she had felt the pressure. "There were some stressful shots, so there were little mistakes there."

But where the margins are minute, especially on the slopey greens of the Gary Player course, little could become large when you are fighting for the championship. "I made a lot of birdies. I made a couple of mistakes too, but that's part of the game."

Golf can be cruel, it can also be rejuvenating. For the petite Thai conqueror with an infectious smile, this is the end of a long drought.

Phatlum, who has returned to India after 14 years on an invite, had her first look at the changed environment and used all her experience on American shores to plot her way around the course where "every shot counts".

With soft skills to match the Mudmee silk her hometown of Khon Kaen is famous for, Phatlum steadily improved with rounds of 72, 71, 69 as her understanding of the playground grew, to finish on a high of 65. With a solo second at the 2018 Women's British Open in her resume, the Women's Indian Open champion of 2008, 2009 and 2012 had seen better years on the LPGA. With the 2026 crown, her love affair with the tournament continued. "I think I could live in India," the 36-year-old said, giggling.

Stomach bug Pranavi's biggest hurdle

The Indians are getting closer to that hallowed trophy, which Aditi Ashok won in 2016. A second place finish is as good as it gets for now. "It was Pornanong's experience which came clutch today," explained Pranavi Urs, who finished tied-fourth.

The biggest obstacle for Pranavi was not the course, but her stomach. Despite the trouble, the Mysuru girl finished with a 72 and a total of three-under. Tvesa Malik was the third Indian in the top-10, at 7th place.

Final scores: -11 Pornanong Phatlum (Tha) 72-71-69-65; -7 Vani Kapoor (Ind) 73-69-69-70; -4 Shannon Tan (Sin) 68-77-67-72; -3 Sara Kouskova (Cze) 70-70-73-72; Pranavi Urs (Ind) 70-70-73-72; **Select scores:** -1 (7th) Tvesa Malik 71-73-71-72; +6 (22) Avani Prashanth.