

## The NZ Hickory Open, Christchurch Golf Club, 2023



The New Zealand Hickory Open was played on a stunning sunny day March 13<sup>th</sup> 2023. This was the second year the National Championship was hosted at Christchurch Golf club after the inaugural event last year. The start of the weekends Hickory events had been the International Anzac Flask played on the Friday over 9 holes Foursome and Singles with Australia beating New Zealand by 2 strokes.



An international field was represented by 7 Australians, 1 American and 1 Canadian boasting 1 US Hickory Open Winner, 4 Australian Hickory Open winners playing against the best New Zealand could offer. Players came from both ends of the country to participate in one of the few National Championships where no qualifying rounds are played. You just pick up your clubs and register.

Sir Bob Charles, the British Open Champion in 1963, is one of the key people leading the renaissance of Hickory Golf in New Zealand and, the NZ Hickory Open is a testament in his belief that Hickory golf is the game for the people. As one of the NZ Hickory Open committee, he was key in setting up the course to represent the historical significance of Prestwick's 12 hole Open Championship layout 150 years ago.

The day started with the International players being driven into the starting area with vintage cars to the sound of the Lone Piper, Oscar Browitt, 12 years old, to a hushed crowd. Formalities out of the way the field was set off under the Starter orders, Mr Simon Fraser, a Christchurch Golf Club member as well as the R&A, resplendent in full Fraser Clan Kilt and regalia.



The bar was set high with the quality of players challenging for the Open Trophy with the International guests well versed in Tournament hickory play, the previous years winner, a local golf professional, James Devlin, and the top women golfer from Christchurch Golf Club, Catherine Bell, taking a day off her wedding preparations, playing off the stick against the men off the same tees and lastly, coming to the tee once again, Sir Bob.

Catherine Bell, paired up with Christchurch Golf Clubs past Mens Champion, Richard Reed, took out top honours in a very tight finish. With Reed only having played with hickories 2 time previously it was an outstanding outcome. Last years winner, James Devlin and his partner peter Lund, came close to making it 2 wins from 2 Opens. Sir Bob made a podium finish with his playing partner Geoff Saunders, a former representative player, making a comeback in Hickory play.



The morning started with the Foursomes with a number of formidable pairings resulting in the following final scores on the Leaderboard.

Gross 1st , Richard Reed & Catherine Bell 51, Gross 2<sup>nd</sup>, James Devlin & Peter Lund 51, Gross 3rd , Sir Bob Charles & Geoff Saunders 53.

A quick turnaround after lunch saw the field back in play with the Singles matches and it was going to be interesting to see who was going to take an early lead. The Australians came in hard and fast with some excellent play by Bruce Collins below, seeing him finish 3 over followed closely by Andrew Baker and Greg Mellifont. Greg had been injured and came gamely back for the singles with an outstanding round. All three players took out the top scores for the best Nett.



Catherine Bell continued her excellent form, holding her own off the tee on the monster 500 yard par 4 against the Men and bringing it home with a stunning 3 over a true testament that women can hold their own. Five women played in the field scoring well with the Christchurch Club President, Jaqui Lowe, shooting a Ladies best Nett of 49.



Playing in the back of the field the final pairings were going to go to create the drama that a National Championship thrives on. The dark horse of Mark Lawson, Christchurch Golf Clubs Head greenkeeper, was paired with Sir Bob. Playing off a 6 handicap, Lawson had been getting in a few practice rounds prior and knew the greens intimately. Starting off with a bogey on the 1<sup>st</sup> holing a 30 foot clutch putt was the beginning of one of those rounds that you dream about. Driving the second green set him up well and the stunning second onto the 5<sup>th</sup> for a birdie putt set the tone for his round.

Sir Bob matched Lawson shot for shot with Lawson finally taking a slight lead. Sir Bobs early years intimated that he wasn't that long off the tee, in the Open, he drove like a man who had no tomorrow, out driving his younger competitors a number of times. Considering he has celebrated his 87<sup>th</sup> birthday, it is a feat that needs to be seen to be believed. Sir Bob is also known as one of the best putters in the world and, in this instance, he was saved a number of times to hold against Lawsons onslaught. Catching Lawson on the last couple of holes it came down to the final 12<sup>th</sup> hole with the gallery standing around the background of the green.



Lawson, put it long but wide left into the rough having to come over the greenside bunkers and Sir Bob played a shorter line with a clean run into the pin. His chip landed 3 ft from the pin and there was a roar from the crowd. Lawson had to drop it close and his shot was just a bit too long from a more difficult lie. His return putt slid the hole and he putted out leaving Sir Bob to finish out with a birdie putt and, in doing so, winning the 2023 NZ Hickory Open.

Final results: Sir Bob Charles – 49, Mark Lawson – 50, Catherine Bell - 51

It was truly a magical finish to an outstanding weekend of competition and a fantastic display of Hickory golf by the podium players.

The day closed out with the Ode to Robbie Burns by Jamie McEwan, as he cut the Haggis, piped in by Graeme Bryce. There were tears in the eyes of the crowd, it was a poignant moment.

An outstanding closing function run by Master of Ceremonies, Glenn Bongartz, NZ Open Hickory Committee Chairman, administering prizegiving, recognising the achievement of the players over the day. A charity auction was held to raise funds for Junior Golf and spirited bidding was received from the floor.

It was a special moment seeing Sir Bob receive the coveted NZ Hickory Open Trophy. This was the culmination and reward for bringing an idea into reality and then being able to compete at the highest level to once again, place another Championship outcome on an already crowded golfing CV. Whilst this Championship may not have the same gravitas and recognition of the British Open, the outcome is probably closest to his heart.



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