

Changing of

Queensland's Katherine Hull,
2009 ANZ Ladies Masters
champion – where to next?



By BRUCE YOUNG

Bruce Young is a full-time golf journalist based on the Gold Coast and has received multiple awards for his work in print, the Internet and radio.

Bruce caddied for several years in the USA, Europe, Japan and Australasia, and has commentated both nationally and internationally on televised golf events.

Pictures:
Anthony Powter

The already significant golfing fortunes of Queensland's Katherine Hull took another huge leap forward when she won the 2009 ANZ Ladies Masters at RACV Royal Pines, adding another prestigious title to the Canadian Open she won in August.

It was not only that she won the tournament but that she beat one of the strongest fields assembled for the event in recent years by an emphatic five shots that further highlighted the growth she has experienced as a result of – and since – her maiden LPGA Tour win.

Hull entered the week off the back of two runner-up placed finishes in the NSW Open and the New Zealand Women's Open and, along with her great finish to season 2008, she was considered one of the players to beat. She had been tournament hardened by her two early season starts while higher world-ranked players were playing their first event of the season, and that ultimately made a difference.

Despite the presence of two of 2008's four major winners in women's golf, Yani Tseng and Ji Yai Shin, the European number one, Gwladys Nocera, six-time winner of the ANZ Ladies Masters, Karrie Webb, and three-time winner Laura Davies, Hull deserved to be one of the favourites to take out the title and she was not about to let down those who felt the same.

Hull was arguably Australia's most improved golfer of either gender in 2008 and she was not backing away from the perceived and developing battle between her and Karrie Webb for the mantle of Australian golf's leading female golfer.

"It is nice to be included in the same category as Karrie as she is probably Australia's greatest golfer," said Hull before the event. However, when it was suggested a battle between Webb and Hull on Sunday would be great for the tournament, Hull was quick to say 'bring it on', highlighting a far greater belief in her capabilities than was ever the case previously.

Playing in the afternoon group on day one, Hull made a solid if unspectacular start to the event with an opening round of 69 which had her two behind the three-way tie for the lead shared by Wales' Becky Brewerton, Norway's Marianne Skarpnord and South African Lee-Anne Pace.

Before lunch the following morning however, Hull had added a round of 67 and at 8 under she had moved to within two of the lead. "I'd love to win here," she said after her round. "Growing up as a kid you dream about winning the ANZ Ladies Masters or Aussie Open; it's just what you do. It's a huge goal of mine this year to keep doing what I'm doing and be patient."

the Guard



While much of the talk was of Hull's increasing chances to win the event, day two was dominated by two players. Kristie Smith burst into prominence at last year's Women's Australian Open where, as an amateur, she led after 36 holes and eventually finished in a share of 6th. A few months later she became the Australian Amateur Champion and turned professional in the latter half of 2008.

Smith produced a course record round of ten under 62 which included an amazing 12 birdies, smashing her previous best round of 66, also recorded at Royal Pines in a junior event. Smith credited a switch to cross handed putting for her stunning round. "I haven't been putting very well for the past couple of years. Some of the best players in the world putt cross handed and I thought I'd try it. I gave it a go last week in New Zealand and shot 69 in the last round. I thought I'd give it another go this week. I putted really well yesterday, just didn't hole anything. Today they all just dropped."

Smith would slip from contention over the next two rounds but she again highlighted that she is perhaps the most exciting of Australia's emerging players and potentially the most dynamic. There were very few players in this field capable of going that low. She will play the Futures Tour in the US in 2009.

Yet another Australian Amateur Champion was to steal Hull's thunder on day two. Nikki Campbell won Australian Amateur in 2002 and turned professional not long after. She has played the Japan Ladies Tour since, has won one event there and has career

earnings in Japan of ¥185 million or nearly \$A3 million but she is in no immediate hurry to ply her trade elsewhere.

"America's really the only place I'd like to go to other than Japan," she said. "I'd probably want to finish top ten on the Order of Merit in Japan before I looked at doing that. My best finish is 12th in any one season and I'm usually around 19th or 20th. I've putted well the last two rounds but putting has really been holding me back the last two years. If I can improve that and improve my stats in Japan then that would give me confidence and I might look at going to America. At this stage, there is too much that I still want to achieve in Japan so I'm not really looking past that yet."

Campbell produced a second round of 67 and at 10 under she led by one over Smith as the tournament entered the weekend.

Both Campbell and Smith were to shoot themselves in the foot with third rounds of 78 and 75 respectively and the chasers made their moves. Hull's round of 68 moved her three clear of Queensland-based South Australian Tamie Durdin, another who plays in Japan.

Durdin had shared the lead into the final day of this event twelve months earlier but faltered with a round of 76 to eventually finish 23rd and there were therefore a few demons to exorcise on the final day. Her round of 66 had given her the opportunity to do just that.

Pre-tournament favourites Webb, Shin and Tseng, appeared to be too far back to have a realistic chance of winning and they would need something very special if they were to figure in the finish.

Much of the focus therefore was on the battle between Hull and Durdin and Hull gave a quick indication of what might lie ahead when she birdied the first to move four clear.

Durdin stayed in touch when she birdied the par five 3rd but by the turn she had been unable to reduce the 54 hole margin and it would be Hull who would lead into the all important final nine holes three shots ahead.

The stretch of holes between the 12th and the 14th would all but seal the outcome of the tournament. While Durdin played them in par, Hull birdied the 12th and the potentially dangerous 13th and then capped it off with another at the par-three 14th. By then the horse had all but bolted.

Hull's lead was by then six shots and even though Durdin clawed one back at the par-five 15th, Hull had the luxury of playing the final three holes with a five shot lead. It gave her the chance to enjoy the moment and savour being able to win such a significant event in front of family and friends and to take it all in.

"The heart rate was a little high on the first and second hole," said Hull at her post tournament press conference. "Obviously there is a little bit of adrenaline out there but I think that the end of last season really helped me feel comfortable with being in contention. When you are playing well you forget about what is on your mind and expectations and all that sort of thing. You go out there and play well."

Continued overleaf

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“Jane Crafter said to me the other day that the golf ball doesn’t remember what you did the day before, so it helped keep things in perspective I guess.

“You just focus on your own game. I played a semester of college golf with Tamie (Durdin) and I know she hits it long. I can’t compete with her and half the other girls out here can’t either length-wise but it doesn’t faze me because I know that other parts of my game are strong enough.”

Hull was asked about the increasing expectations on her. “I don’t feel it from the outside. I think I’m kind of my own biggest critic. I have to work to keep my own expectations and self pressure in check but at the same time I welcome the challenge of stepping up and seeing just how far it can take me.

“There has been a lot of work put in; it doesn’t just happen overnight when you win golf tournaments. It takes a lot of hard work. I believe I’ve got the game to do it and a great team of people around me so I think it’s possible.”

If Katherine Hull can make the same progress in 2009 as she made in 2008 she may well be teeing it up at Royal Pines in 2010 with a major championship on her list of victories. That might be a little much to ask but the golfer who promised so much as an amateur, and very early in her professional career, is now delivering.

Of the beaten brigade there were several impressive performances. Durdin may not have been able to keep pace with Hull on the final day but she put the nightmare of 2008 behind her with a solid round of 70 on Sunday and as a result will be scar free as she heads back to Japan.

Korea’s 18 year-old sensation So Yeon Ryu birdied her final four holes to join Durdin in second place. Ryu narrowly missed the rookie of the year title on the highly competitive Korean LPGA Tour in 2008 and appears set to follow the path of so many of her fellow countrywomen into a successful professional career.

The highest world-ranked player in the field, Yani Tseng, put together the best round of day four (66) to finish in a share of 4th with Gwladys Nocera who would also go low on the final day with a round of 67, American Mollie Frankhauser and yet another Australian, Sarah Kemp.

The stocks of Australian golfers were further highlighted by the fact that six Australians finished 10th or better with Lindsey Wright, Anna Rawson and Nikki Garrett making up that group.

Six-time winner, Karrie Webb, displayed a little improvement with a final round of 69 but her 30th-place finish was one of her poorest showings at the event with which her name has become synonymous.

The 20th staging of the ANZ Ladies Masters showcased the significant role the event has played in the history and development of women’s golf in Australia and it was fitting that one of the game’s brightest stars in this country should prevail.