

2014 North Carolina Open Association Croquet Singles April 24-27, 2014 Pinehurst Resort & Country Club



Brian Cumming won the 2014 North Carolina Open, beating Stuart Lawrence +17tp, -18tp, +16 in the final. This was Cumming's third straight NC Open title and fourth overall, both records.

Pinehurst local Russ Hanson won the first flight, winning seven of eight games in the double round robin.

Play got off to a slow start, with longer games and fewer triple peels than usual for this event. Except, that is, for Stuart Lawrence, who managed four quick wins and two triples on the first day. Jeff Soo had the day's only other triple; he also finished the day undefeated, as did the other top seeds, Doug Grimsley and twice defending champion Brian Cumming.

Weather was just about ideal, with warm sunny days and the notorious pine and oak pollen season well past its peak. High winds did create a challenge on Friday, but the main challenge was the condition of the lawns. An unusually cold and prolonged winter had left the Pinehurst lawns in indifferent condition, with large bare patches around many hoops. Opinions were mixed as to the desirability of playing on court 2, either the worst or the most fun court, depending on who was talking.

On day 2 First Flight joined in, five players in a double round robin. Top seeds Russ Hanson and Russ Dilley got off to strong starts, both undefeated, Dilley with the day's only pegout in the flight.

The Championship knockout began mid-afternoon, with a single-game play-in round for seeds 7 through 10. Mike Taylor and 15-year-old Matthew Essick won their matches to advance to the best-of-three quarterfinals against the top two seeds. Despite the late start all four quarterfinals were well under way by the end of play, much to the TD's relief.

Essick started his quarterfinal against Soo, the top seed and national champion, with a +4 win in high winds. #2 seed Cumming survived the first game against Taylor by the same score. Lawrence and Robert Hurst pegged down with less than half an hour remaining in their first game. Mike Todorovich took the first game against Grimsley +16, then had chances to win the match in game 2 after he pegged out Grimsley's rover ball. But Todorovich's inexperience in three-ball endings gave Grimsley too many free shots, and Grimsley eventually hit and finished to level the match.

Todorovich's much improved play was no surprise to those who had seen him in action at Nationals earlier in the month. 2013 was his first year of tournament AC play, and his start was unimpressive to say the least. Despite his lowly ranking he was selected for the WCF World Championships that year, where he lost every game. But he also competed against and observed the world's best players, and decided to completely rework his swing and dedicate himself to AC. He is now climbing steadily through the rankings.

First Flight became truly competitive on Saturday. Becky Essick reversed her 0/3 start to finish the day at 3/6. By day's end every player in the flight had between two and four wins, so that all five players were still in contention to win.

In the Championship quarterfinals, Lawrence won the pegged-down game 1 against Hurst +1 on time. Game 2 also went to time, Lawrence again winning +1. A very focused Grimsley won the decider against Todorovich. Taylor leveled his match with Cumming in a scrappy +8 game, but Cumming won the match with no drama, +26, in game 3. Soo leveled against Essick with a quick +25tp, but the sharpshooting

**2014 North Carolina Open
Association Croquet Singles
April 24-27, 2014
Pinehurst Resort & Country Club**

Essick won the match, his first-ever best-of-three, +11 in game 3.

Both semi-finals featured plenty of interaction, but both finished in straight games. Cumming beat Grimsley +4 in the first, after pegging out Grimsley to leave peg and penult vs. 4-back. Grimsley had a couple of very long shots that barely missed. Cumming won, then closed out the match with a clean +26tp in game 2.

Lawrence won the first against Essick +10. In game 2, Lawrence pegged out Essick leaving 2 and peg vs. 4-back. Essick took position on the lift and scored 4-back, but Lawrence picked up a 3-ball break for the match. He failed to get position at penult, and Essick hit and scored penult. With no rush to rover he took off to position and scored rover, then lagged to the peg. Lawrence hit and then over several turns managed to discourage or prevent Essick from shooting at the peg, eventually finishing +1.

On Sunday Russ Hanson won his first two games to guarantee him first place, then won his final game just to make sure. He finished with 7/8 with +23 net points. Russ Dilley claimed sole possession of second place at 4/8, while the other three players all finished 3/8.

Soo won the Plate knockout, beating Bob Roth, Essick, and Todorovich.

Lawrence had the first break of the final. Cumming took the long lift shot and hit, then tripled to win game 1 after Lawrence missed the lift. In game 2, Cumming's break came undone with a long approach to 3-back, and Lawrence leveled the match, also with a triple peel. The deciding game was more interactive, both players having difficulty getting breaks established. Cumming looked set to finish with a triple, but at rover the peeled ball barely scored the hoop and the striker's ball ended just behind, leaving no realistic chance for a jump and no way to defend against an easy pickup for Lawrence, who had a clip on 5. Lawrence went to 4-back but was unable to get to the fourth ball until late in the break, resulting in a mediocre leave. Cumming hit and finished +16 for game, match, and championship.

Lawrence won the peeling competition. He, Cumming, and Soo each had three triples, but Lawrence also remembered to keep track of his double peels.

--Jeff Soo

Championship Flight

1. Brian Cumming
2. Stuart Lawrence
3. Matthew Essick
3. Doug Grimsley
5. Jeff Soo
6. Mike Todorovich
7. Simon Jenkins
8. Robert Hurst
9. Horace Hayworth
10. Mike Taylor
11. Bob Roth
12. Harper Peterson
13. Dick Sullivan
14. Tommy Harrington
15. Bob Whitmore
16. Paul Embry
17. Bill Bopp (WD)
18. Chris Christian

First Flight

1. Russ Hanson
2. Russ Dilley
3. Becky Essick
4. Mike Conry
5. Bill Rinaman