

Western North Carolina Challenge

September 24-27, 2015

Lake Toxaway, NC

The inaugural Western North Carolina Challenge brought many of the country's top Golf Croquet players to the Golf Croquet capital of the USCA. With the team selection deadline for the 2016 Golf Croquet World Teams Championship fast approaching, this would be a last chance for players to catch the attention of the USCA Selection Committee. It would also serve to "bring out of the shadows" some of our top players who don't appear on the current ranking list due to lack of recent tournament games, important for ensuring that our team is properly ranked by the World Croquet Federation.

The Lake Toxaway and Burlingame Country Clubs were generous as always in providing top-class lawns at no charge for the tournament, making club facilities available, and hosting visiting players.

The presence of so many top players was also a necessary ingredient for the Pro-Am held the day before (reported elsewhere). This was a great kick-off to the tournament, with smiles and laughter all day long, in perfect weather.

Weather turned cooler and wetter once the Challenge began. Players made the most of it, taking this as an opportunity to prepare for the expected conditions at World Teams next May in London. The rain caused significant delays on day 2, with standing water stopping play several times, but the fast-draining courts allowed the tournament to get back on schedule the next day. With the lawns double-cut each day, the pace stayed quick in spite of the rain.

Play started in two blocks of six, Ben Rothman and Mohammad Kamal each going undefeated. The top three from each block then met in a cross-block round, and likewise for the bottom three. While all 12 players would advance to the knockout round, the cross-block games would be used for seeding. Local player Gil Flowers, seeded last and playing in his first top-class event, won three of his games to advance to the top cross-block. Rothman edged Kamal 7-6 to claim the top pick in the knockout.

The "draw" for the knockout was done in an unusual way. Based on an idea put forward by NZ's Chris Clarke, players were allowed to choose their places in the bracket, starting with the #1 block finisher and moving on down the list. While this might not seem to be much of a motivation for earning the #1 pick, the remaining players showed such an aversion to meeting Rothman in the quarterfinals that they obliged him by forcing the last two picks into his quarter, an easier draw than he might have expected. The knockout turned out to be well-balanced and the "draw" itself was entertaining, so this approach is worth repeating.

It was no surprise to see Rothman and Kamal joined by the brothers Ahab Dincer and Sherif Abdelwahab in the semi-finals. After a drubbing in game 1, Abdelwahab regrouped to beat Rothman 1-7, 7-4, 7-6. Dincer, who had started the tournament slowly, caught fire in the semi-finals to beat Kamal 7-2, 7-4.

The final match was well-attended, despite the gloomy weather. Both players dialed back the power at times, mixing in gentle-to-moderate-paced clearances with their usual hard-hitting swings. Abdelwahab started game 1 with a 2-0 lead after gently running hoop 2 from about 10 yards. The players traded hoops through 8, Abdelwahab leading 5-3. After a long battle Dincer scored 9 from the boundary, then 10 with a jump shot. Another long battle at 11 and Dincer took a 6-5 lead. He closed out game 1 with a jump shot at 13, 7-6.

Game 2 likewise started with a 2-0 lead for Abdelwahab followed by hoop 3 for Dincer, but Dincer's shooting touch turned cold and Abdelwahab cruised to level the match with a 7-1 win.

Dincer got the early lead in the deciding game, taking hoop 4 with a ten-foot jump shot for 3-1. Both players shot exceptionally well as Abdelwahab caught up to 3-all. The pressure-filled final stretch featured many excellent shots plus a few clunkers, Dincer getting to 6-3. Abdelwahab fought back to 5-6 but gave Dincer the winning point by knocking his ball through 12 while trying to clear it.

Matthew Griffith won the Plate, beating Russell Dilley in the final.

--Jeff Soo

The results:

1. Ahab Dincer
2. Sherif Abdelwahab
3. Ben Rothman
4. Mohammad Kamal
5. Matthew Griffith
6. Cheryl Bromley
7. James Huff
8. Russell Dilley
9. Gil Flowers
10. Jeff Soo
11. Michael Zuro
12. Michael Albert