

## **WHICH CLUB? COMMONWEALTH!**

**By Karen Harding**

Commonwealth cemented its standing as the premier club in women's amateur competition by claiming back to back flags with an emphatic win over a resurgent Yarra Yarra in the Section One Metropolitan Pennant Final held at Cranbourne.

The scoreline of 5 ½ - 1 ½ was not what most were expecting after Yarra's brilliant showing during the home-and-away series, but ultimately it was a decisive win by a stronger team and given what Commonwealth had to do to achieve it, one that will afford a great deal of satisfaction.

The seeds of famous victory were actually sown three weeks earlier. After losing National Squad member Bree Elliot to Kingston Heath before the season, Commonwealth had regrouped and was lying second to Yarra. But a loss to Metropolitan followed by a close loss to Kingston Heath meant that only victory in the last two rounds would snare a place in the Final against ladder leader Yarra. That these two rounds were against last year's runner-up Heidelberg and then Yarra made the job that much more difficult.

But the girls grasped the enormity of their task and knuckled down to some hard work. It paid off.

Team manager and member Jessica Clyde said, "I really think that beating Heidelberg when we were without Elissa (Orr) and Laura (Griffin) in the second last round was the crux of it, what we had to do. With Yarra, we knew we had to win that last match, we couldn't rely on someone else falling over. When we actually beat them, Elissa and Louise (Briers) were saying then, we've got a great chance here."

Buoyed by sound advice beforehand from club legend Briers on handling the difficult windy conditions, Commonwealth burst out of the blocks. By the time matches reached the fourth hole, it held the upper hand in five, with another square, and was still in this position after nine holes. Despite some spirited opposition from Yarra over the remaining holes, Commonwealth drew away to win comfortably.

Though the end result looks pedestrian on paper, the match-ups were anything but - and made for great viewing.

In the contest between fellow State Squad members Elissa Orr and Courtney Gay, Orr – club champion at Commonwealth for the last four years in a row - started birdie, par, birdie, par, birdie to be three-under par after five and five-up on her opponent after nine holes. Gay, the 2011 Yarra club champ, started to charge with three successive birdies on 10, 11 and 12 to cut the margin to two and give supporters the sniff of hope. Orr, however, snuffed that out quickly with birdie at the par-three 14<sup>th</sup> and went on to win 3/2.

Last year's Final hero Reanna Matthews, playing less this year due to studies, had a close first nine with Yarra team captain Corinna Bryant, only one hole the difference, before Matthews eagled the 10<sup>th</sup> and birdied the 14<sup>th</sup> to close it out 4/3.

Matthews figured in two of the most fantastic golf matches of the season. In the critical round against Heidelberg, she found herself in a dogfight against Adele Huggard, a match eventually decided on the 25<sup>th</sup> hole. And at Victoria against Kingston Heath's State Squad member Tilly Poulsen, Matthews was three under par after 15 holes, only to find herself a 4/3 loser to Poulsen's stunning 7-under which included three eagles. Some golf!

The clash of the Pocket Rockets – Griffin and Yarra's Rachel Korevaar – in the number four match was the closest of the day. Nip and tuck all the way, the match was eventually called square when it reached the 18<sup>th</sup> still even but with the flag decided. Korevaar won all five matches she contested during the home-and-away.

Lauren Sanft and Nancy Bickerton also had a see-sawing contest but the momentum swung Sanft's way at the business end and the match was hers, 2 up, while Kimberley Marsden accounted for Biv Gilson 1up. Marsden and Sanft, both from Mansfield, have been playing pennant since they were 15 and are just two of Commonwealth's deep pool of talented youngsters.

Alex Czarnecki proved a real find for Commonwealth this season at the number seven position, winning five of her seven matches in the home-and-away and snaring an important point at 3/2 against Yarra's Linda Nayna who had an excellent season herself, losing only one match.

Without a doubt, the standout golf of the day by an individual was provided by Yarra's Rio Watanabe. Just 16 years old, she blew past Briers 8/7. But it was the manner in which she did it which had everybody talking. Briers was one over the card after four holes but found herself four down against Watanabe's three birdies and a par. It didn't end there. Watanabe continued the onslaught to be four under par after nine holes and eight up on her opponent. Halves in birdies at 10 and pars at 11 gave the match to the Yarra youngster.

Not many players could come off an 8/7 hiding and be fulsome and generous in praise of their conqueror. But Briers is a class act. The golfing world could do with more such as her. Passionate about her own club but with an eye on the big picture, the overall health of the game. Of Watanabe she said, "She did not miss a green, was on everything in regulation, did not have a chip all day. It was wonderful. I have no doubt she can make a professional. I think you'll hear a lot of her."

By what measure can Briers' worth be assessed to her club? One of only two life members at Commonwealth, she has been club champion on seven occasions, state amateur champion three times, state and national team captain and later team selector. With the best of her career behind her, she was still available when her club needed her, went willingly to a likely loss against Watanabe, was wise counsel to young heads and helped Clyde and Orr rally the troops for the tough task of successive flags.

For Yarra, a case of what might have been.

This time last year the club was in danger of relegation, saved by Bryant winning at the 20<sup>th</sup> hole in the last match of the season. The addition of Olympia Kang and Watanabe to the team plus the

return of Gilson who missed the previous season through injury strengthened the team immensely. Kang is a +1 marker from South Korea whose uncle John is a teaching professional with BannLynch. She came to live with her uncle at Sandhurst to work on her golf on sandbelt courses before travelling to the U.S. to pursue her goal of professional golf. Kang won all five of her matches before her visa ran out. Losing a player of this calibre is a blow. It is to Yarra's credit that it kept going before falling to its eventual nemesis, Commonwealth.

Watanabe is a recent arrival from Japan with her family. Still a student, she has the intention of staying three years before she, too, follows her dream of professional golf.

With these two aided by Gay, Bryant and Korevaar, Yarra had a dream start to the season and looked all-conquering as the weeks went by. With the 2011 Friday Metropolitan Matchplay title to its name, the club had good reason to entertain hopes of taking the double. It was not to be. But an outstanding season it was, and a stunning turnaround from its position last year.

Commonwealth has now appeared in three successive finals with victories in the last two. Since 1984 it has claimed eight flags, four since finals were introduced in 1996. Twice in this period it has gone back-to-back; now it has another opportunity for the three-peat, a feat not achieved by any club since the 1980s. Interestingly, Commonwealth's last two pennant victories have coincided with Yani Tseng's Women's Australian Open titles at its course. She, too, is on a hat-trick. Should the 2012 Open be awarded to Commonwealth and Tseng win again, a betting person would be silly not to throw a bob or two on Commonwealth to take another flag.