

US KIDS CHAMPIONSHIP

- JUNE 2011 -



Foreword

In a different style to the normal reports, this starts with what I consider the most important result that have been achieved by our young ambassadors.

I then follow the normal introduction on the tournament with my diary for the week - hopefully in a different style than the normal dour report.

I just wanted to say how well all your young lads came over both in the way they played their golf and also in the way they handled themselves both on and off the course. It was a pleasure to meet you all and it was a great privilege to caddy for Quint and please pass on my thanks to him and his fellow players. The comments from the other caddies were that the ability they have was excellent and well worth developing.

All the best for the future and all being well I look forward to seeing you next year.

*Regards
David Buchan*

Introduction

The Malta Golf Association was invited to send young golf players to Scotland to participate in the prestigious US Kids Golf European Qualifying Championship. The tournament, in its 4th year, attracted children of all abilities aged between 5 and 18 years to compete for a place in the U.S Kids Golf World Championships at Pinehurst Golf Club in California.

This year Luca Caruana (16 years), John Micallef Stafrace and Quint Van Beek (both 14 years) represented Malta and were amongst some 450 of the world's best junior players that hailed from 30 different nations. This was Quint's second participation in this tournament but for Luca and John this was their first real experience in multi-day tournament play overseas.

The three young Malta boys are regular playing members at the Royal Malta Golf Club and over the 2010-2011 season fared well in competitions at their home club. John started the golf season by winning the MGA Shield and saw his handicap drop from 26.0 to a current 10.7. Quint also improved his handicap by five shots and now plays off 9.9. Luca dropped 4 strokes to a current 12.3 despite playing lesser rounds due to his academic examinations.

Venue

The Malta boys played their rounds at the Luffness New Golf Club in Aberlady, East Lothian. Luffness was set up as a par-72 and measured approximately 6400 yards for Luca and 6100 yards for Quint and John. The course showed all the characteristics of a links course with extensive pot bunkers, heather for rough and undulating fast greens. The course started to get tough already at the 4th – a long 500 something yards par

5. The 5th was not any easier – an uphill par 4 with deep rough left off the fairway. But the tough really got going as one crossed the road and started the 6th where the commanding view of what lay ahead was enough to startle even the most ardent of golfers.

Tournament Format

The tournament was played over three rounds of 18 holes each (preceded by a practice round) with zero handicap allowance. No cut was applied after any round played. Additionally, the tournament organisers tweaked the Rules of Golf just a little bit – applying a 10 shot penalty instead of a disqualification for a breach of a Rule – so as to allow everyone to play their full rounds of golf (rather than having to send them back home after the expense their families had incurred).

The top finishers in each category then competed in the Van Horn Cup – a showpiece event, modelled on the Ryder Cup, where the best European players were pitted against the top non-Europe golfers.

Diary of Events

Sunday 29th May: OUT

We departed at just after 21:00 hours on a Ryanair flight bound for Glasgow Prestwick. On arrival we stuffed all our equipment and bags in a people's carrier, drove across to Edinburgh and collapsed in our hotel beds at around 02:30 hours on Monday.

Monday 30th May: PRACTICE ROUND

After a mid-morning breakfast, we went to the clubhouse of the Gullane Golf Club where the boys registered for the tournament. At 13:00 hours they started their practice round, amazingly enough, in bright spirits despite the travelling and the lack of rest. Quint had already experienced links golf from the previous year and he was soon reminded how fast the greens could be. For Luca and John the stark reality was experienced almost from the word go - jungle for rough, a gorge for a bunker and an ice skating ring for a green. Additionally the wind was blowing hard and the weather was cold – the *Titleist* weather proofs came out. But overall the boys adapted well and I was pleased to see how well they handled themselves when things became difficult. Not once did I see a head go down in despair or clubs thrown in the air despite errant shots or missed putts. The funniest moment came towards the end when one of the boy's chip onto the 18th green saw the ball land fast and past the pin to roll off between two green humps at the back of the green and to finally stop out of bounds on the road bordering the course. The bewilderment of what we were seeing was soon followed by the funnier aspect of what actually happened.

Whilst Luca had finished his exams, Quint and John still had theirs to contend with; English Literature being the first due after our return to Malta. Macbeth did actually make it two or three times to the dinner table during our trip and the boys really intended to make an effort. But how could they? Macbeth and the three witches remained where they belonged – in the cauldron of Scottish history! An early night was adamant for an early morning start. I obeyed the orders to the hilt but I had a strange sensation that the boys would find it hard to settle in so early – I understood that the emotions of being there could perhaps be just too much to allow their young and eager minds to switch off.



Tuesday 31st May: FIRST TOURNAMENT DAY

With tee times of 09:39 for Luca; 10:15 for John and 10:42 for Quint, we left the hotel as soon as we could to give the boys at least 75 minutes of practice ahead of the competition. We had booked caddies for the boys and we met them some 30 minutes ahead of the competition. Jamie (a professional recovering from an injury), Scott and David were to the kids as Seyton was to Macbeth; but, above all, they were gentle, kind and assuring especially when the gorse enveloped a wayward shot.

“The morning opened beautifully, as cruel winds that battered players during practice rounds subsided. The temperatures stayed close to a comfortable 13° C (55° F) with partly cloudy skies and good visibility. The usually fierce Scotland wind stayed relatively calm at 8 Knots with gusts peaking at 14 Knots and the course was in pristine condition and looked its best for the competition.” Huh I hear the boys say.

Luca’s opening shot was low and left – straight into the rough. The anxiety that he showed yesterday, stayed with him during the first round and, actually, did not leave him until after the tournament. His score for the day was a 103 but, totally to his credit, he remained entirely composed and continued to enjoy himself also after the end of play. Quint’s opening drive went down the middle and he strode up the fairway, all the 5 foot of him, as if he was in contention for The Open. His caddie followed hurriedly trying to put the head cover back on the driver – the oldest caddie with the youngest player a potential explosive situation. On the contrary, the two became the best of partners even though Quint shot a 92. John’s drive went the other way and I felt that everything was being played to keep the delegate on edge. The ball sailed long and right but missed all the traps awaiting it – precisely because it was long. Jeez! John’s length was to safeguard him during his rounds as much as it was to punish him. His first day score was 85.

I was witnessing the optimum golfer: calmness in face of adversity; confidence in execution of a shot; and strength to rip the course apart. But the qualities were split over three golfers and the witchcraft of Macbeth’s Hecate was not to be found anywhere around the clubhouse.

Wednesday 1st June: SECOND TOURNAMENT DAY

The real worst thing of shooting the highest score on the first day is that you are the earliest to start the next day. With the course some 30 minutes away from our lodgings, we had to leave the hotel without a proper breakfast. The staff was kind enough to prepare a packed snack albeit not as tasteful as a freshly cooked full blown British breakfast.

“The second round of competition got underway in the face of threatening weather predicted for the early morning and afternoon. Slight rain overnight left the ground softer than Tuesday, and some of the scores from early in the morning reflect that. The day averaged slightly cooler temperatures than were had in the first round, sticking close to 14°C (57°F) throughout the day. The predicted rain for the morning was not a major factor on the course.” Slightly cooler temperatures! Humbug! For our warm Mediterranean blood the wind chill factor over the unprotected ground made it freezing cold and the *Titleist* weather-proofs had to come out again.

Fully conscious that the boys were in real safe (caddie) hands I left the tournament for the day and made my way to Royal Musselburgh where I was an invited guest to play in their Wednesday medal. My playing partner was John Gilmour, the RMGC's secretary. Now medal is a real test on any day but everyone who knows me would fully appreciate the full significance for me. I needed to have worried not. I found myself in a gentle, courteous and totally friendly atmosphere. I still have not fathomed what it was exactly – whether because of the reciprocal arrangements or whether because our clubs share the same alphabetical characters. I strongly suspected that it was the very nature of the members themselves.

I do not believe that anyone wants to know how I shot ten over (my handicap) on this par 70 but it really was a gem parkland course with a tough final 6 holes. If one does not manage a good score by the 12th, then the best way would be a short cut straight to the 19th. To Luffness' 69th position, Royal Musselburgh hails as number 76 in the top 100 Golf courses in Scotland. It is reputed to be the fifth oldest club in the world and its Old Club Cup dating from the club's foundation in 1774 is the oldest trophy still competitively played for in the world. The Cup's importance is such that it is on display at the British Golf Museum at St. Andrews.

Before I left, John Gilmour accepted my request to return on Friday to play the course with the boys. He also made it a point to mention that his Club was to host the Scottish Hickory Open Championship in late August and that they would love to see the participation of members from Malta. Further details of this tournament can be seen at www.scottishhickoryopen.com. It would be worthwhile to know that you would not need to travel with your own hickory clubs. Royal Musselburgh will provide these. Please contact Royal Malta's Club Captain should you be interested.

A bit of trivia collected from Royal Musselburgh. Why is the size of a golf hole what it is (4 ¼")?

The boys had finished their rounds by my return to Luffness and I found Quint a little bit disturbed and not knowing what to do. He was totally sure that he had shot an 83 and not 84 as was recorded and displayed. It was a bit of a touch and go situation because if his marker had mistakenly marked a wrong (lower) gross score on any of the holes then Quint would have had to face a huge penalty. As it turned out, Quint's marker had written a 5 instead of 4 and, of course, our young man had to accept the score as recorded. I thought that the lesson was learnt but it took some time for Quint to accept the mishap – at least until dinner was served and some warm food found its way to his stomach. Luca had also improved on his first day's score and registered a 95. John was just slightly off his first day score and returned an 87.

Trivia answer: 4 ¼" is the standard size of a drain pipe – already a common commodity in Scotland of old which could easily be sawn off and to which a flange and handle could be welded to produce a hole cutter.

Before returning to our quarters, the boys wanted to go to the Gullane pro-shop to have a look at the golf stuff over there. We were lucky, in that we met up with Mr Van Horn – the originator of the US Kids tournament – and his lady wife. We found the Van Horns to be a very pleasant typical American couple, who greeted the boys with enthusiasm and cordiality.



Thursday 2nd June: THIRD TOURNAMENT DAY

The weather on the third day remained cold but also dry. Despite Luca's tee time call again for an early 08:00 hours we unanimously voted not to leave without consuming a warm breakfast - hurriedly eaten, yes, but still warm and vital energy especially for the young legs.

All boys improved on their first round scores. Luca recorded a 93 for a total tournament aggregate of 291, Quint an 85 for a total of 261 and John a good 82 for a total of 254. Of course, the boys were disappointed with their overall results. I did not think that they did that bad. With Royal Malta's par 68 and a relatively low slope rating to Luffness par 72, with the different playing conditions between the RMGC parkland and Luffness links, with everything factored in including weather conditions, speed of greens, nature of rough, lack of experience, etc. I would have estimated that there were at least 5 additional handicap strokes to be considered for each day. In reality the performance would have been as per table below.

Nonetheless, it was also evident that Maltese golf struggles to reach the performance of other nations and that our players need all the help that can be afforded to enable them to reach performance standards. In the Boys 15-18 division, Luca's 32nd place was 69 shots behind South African's Germishuys. In the 14 years category, Quint's 30th and John's 25th place were respectively 40 and 33 shots more than Thailand's Kraivixien. A stark comparison already as they are let alone compared to Germany's Foos – a 13 year old boy who shot 65-74-72 for the tournament.

	Luca	Quint	John
Actual Scores for the tournament	291	261	254
Net Par for the course over 3 days	216	216	216
Handicap Allowance over 3 days	36	30	33
Total Gross	252	246	249
Strokes played over handicap	39	15	5
Allow 5 extra strokes per day	15	15	15
Strokes over handicap 'allowance'	24	0	-10



After four days thinking golf, I thought it was high time that the boys relax a bit and have a change of environment. So we journeyed to Princes Street in Edinburgh and a change of environment it was! If it was who was going to play the lowest number of strokes on the previous days, the boys now started to compete on who spotted the largest number of nice looking girls.

It was good to see them relaxed and, I dare say, most of the lasses were pretty indeed. In all fairness, I lost count after the number exceeded 150 something and I do not know who won – but I did get a stiff neck for trying to be an unbiased referee! The final treat was a much anticipated Mc Donalds followed by X-Men: First Class.

Friday 3rd June: ROYAL MUSSELBURGH GOLF CLUB

Energetic young minds and bodies do not tire very quickly and full use was made today of the Royal Musselburgh's invitation to play their golf course again. Luca and I took on Quint and John on 4BBB matchplay over 18 holes – of course with zero handicap difference. I regretted accepting the scratch format from the word go and by the time we reached the Gully Hole I had to concede defeat. I really did try to keep up with the boys but my ball seemed to want to play a different game to theirs. My hooked second shot on the 18th was finally enough to make me abandon the dimpled thing and the boys (who by now were patiently waiting for me to walk up what felt like Golgotha). The boys gave me a shrug and proceeded to finish off with more birdies whilst I walked slowly back to the car trying to cope with a tired body and a miserable soul. The highlight of the day was again the courtesy shown to all of us by the Royal Musselburgh's membership. We were made to feel so welcome by every member in every flight that we encountered. It was so warm to see that the boys were treated as golfers in the every sense of the word.

Needless to say a few hours of healthy air had to be followed by an even healthier dinner. Well supposedly so. I do not think that I need to explain that what constitutes as healthy eating is inversely equal to one's age. With 3 votes to 1, I was forced to agree that fried chicken with salted chips in plenty of ketchup was the best way to end the day.

Saturday 4th June: ST ANDREWS

With only a few kilometres and the Forth Bridge between us and St Andrews of course we could not miss the opportunity to travel across to the home of golf and see the Old Course – the holiest of holies in golf courses worldwide. Despite the St Andrews Links (Amateur) Trophy being played on the course, the boys were allowed to have their photograph taken atop the Swilcan Bridge. Like Jack Nicklaus before them, the boys fell in love with the course immediately even though they could not play it. They could appreciate the meaning of being there on the 1st tee ahead of the starter's box staring at perhaps one of the widest fairways in golf with the Swilcan Burn protecting the Himalayas Putting Green; the 17th Road Hole requiring a tee shot over the Old Course Hotel's shed with the Road Bunker awaiting an errant approach shot and all the way back to the 18th with its Valley of Sin and the R&A Clubhouse as a backdrop.

Of course, the trip could not be complete without paying a visit to the British Golf Museum. It was another fun experience for the boys who enjoyed the game's history and all the records, collections and memorabilia that the R&A managed to bring together in this nucleus of a building.

My favourite piece inside the Museum remains the item on Mary Queen of Scots. Mary was perhaps the ultimate golfer and was so smitten with the game that she teed up a day or two after her husband, Lord Darnley, was murdered, bringing scowls from the church for not showing proper mourning. Eventually this became one of the charges levelled against her costing her the crown, her head, and a chance to win another golf match! Her half-brother, James Stewart, the Earl of Moray claimed that she *indulged in sports that were clearly unsuitable to women*. More crudely, Moray wrote that *staying at Holyroodhouse for a few days after the murder, she then went to Seton, taking exercise one day right openly in the fields with pall-mall and golf, and at night clearly dallying with Bothwell* – Bothwell being James, the 1st Duke of Orkney. God bless her soul.



The day was still not over. There was still more golf to be played – this time we were guests of John Watson (ex green-keeper at Royal Malta) at his home club in Crail. The Crail Golfing Society instituted in 1786 is the seventh oldest golf club in the world. We played the Balcomie Links designed by Old Tom Morris himself and what a superb course it was: *a magic course simply asking the golfer to hit over rocky bays, to greens surrounded by gorse, from tees high above fairways and into elevated greens*. We started playing at 4:30 in the afternoon in a fine healthy Scottish breeze. The scenery was amazing – yet another fine links course with history seemingly wanting to ooze through the grass. The boys played behind us from the yellow tees and it was to be another enjoyable experience for them. Luca played best with 37 Stableford points whilst Quint and John also played in the 30's. For me, well for me it was really magical. With 7 pars and 5 bogeys for a seven-under handicap on the first 12 holes it was my best ever 12 holes both in Malta or abroad – and that was off the white tees. Unfortunately, John could not help himself and whilst we were walking up the 12th fairway he mentioned the word. Committee! Ugh – my Achilles heel! I could hear the spirit of Old Tom laughing as we approached the par three 13th and the last act had a tragic ending – that Macbeth again!

Sunday 5th June: **IN**

After breakfast the boys wanted one last round of golf before returning home. I knew that Kilmarnock (Barassie) was only a couple of miles from Prestwick Airport. Barassie was the chosen course for the R&A Junior Open in 2004 and held special memories. I wanted the boys to experience it as well. Unfortunately there was a shotgun competition on the day. With Royal Troon also likely to be a refusal, we tried the Glasgow Golf Club but also decided against it as it seemed expensive relative to the time that we had for our disposal. But the boys were not to be denied their last chance and so we found this nine-hole facility – actually very much more like a field but the boys had fun nonetheless. The trip had to have its final climax. John's 50-something degree wedge on the final par 3 sailed over the flag and rattled over the club house roof before settling in between the pots and plants. Anything thinned would have gone through the bay windows. We retreated quickly and within a few more hours we arrived safely and dry (thanks to Ray Calleja's *Titleist*) back home still carrying the joys and tribulations of 117 holes of golf.