Pan, Rai share halfway lead in PGA John Deere Classic

AFP- C.T. Pan and Aaron Rai defied tough, gusty winds to card eight-under-par 63s on Friday and share the lead heading into the weekend at the PGA Tour John Deere Classic in Illinois.
On 14-under 128, the pair had a one-shot lead over England's Harry Hall, who had five birdies in a five-under 66 for 129.

Hayden Springer, who carded a spectacular 59 on Thursday, shot an even par 71 and was among half a dozen players sharing fourth on 12-under 130.

Taiwan's Pan, warming up for the Paris Olympics where he'll be aiming to improve on the bronze medal he won in Tokyo, was delighted with a bogey-free round in the testing conditions, highlighted by his chip-in for eagle at the 14th.

"I'm actually impressed by myself," he said. "It's pretty tough out there when the wind picks up to 15, 20 mph.

"It's totally opposite wind direction as well, so hitting different tee shot, different clubs and have different numbers for the approach shots," Pan added. "I was able to hit a lot of good iron shots to give myself birdie chances out there."

Pan, who claimed his only PGA Tour win to date at the 2019 RBC Heritage, has just one top 10 finish this year – a tie for third at the Mexico Open.

A solid week is just what he was looking for with the Olympics starting later this month.

"I always want to get my conditioning, get my mental state ready for the Olympics," he said. "That's the biggest event for my country and for myself also.

"And it would be really cool to play well at an event that

only happens once every four years.”

England’s Rai fired eight birdies in his 63, including a long bomb at the 15th – his sixth hole of the day.

“Definitely tougher today,” he said. “I think we had great conditions yesterday, as good as we can get. Today was pretty different. A lot of crosswinds, probably blew 10 to 15 (mph) all day.

“I played well … had a lot of opportunities and made a lot of putts as well.”

– Building confidence –

Rai had a share of the 54-hole lead last week in Detroit. He couldn’t close out a first PGA Tour win, but said the experience of contending on Sunday was valuable.

“I think experiencing it definitely just gives confidence, builds another layer to the game, builds another layer to the mental side as well,” he said.

With Pan and Rai in the clubhouse, Springer regained the solo lead with his third birdie of the day, holing out from a bunker at the second – his 11th of the day – to reach 15-under.

But he fell back with back-to-back birdies at the third and fourth and a double-bogey at the sixth to finish the day tied with Eric Cole, Davis Thompson, Denny McCarthy, Im Sung-jae and amateur Luke Clanton.

“I hit some bumps on the back nine, but more just mental errors and not making those short putts more than anything else,” Springer said.

“All in all, I really feel like I played OK – I knew there was going to be a little bit of a contrast. It’s pretty tough to go that low multiple times in a row.”

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