

INSIDE THE ROPES

First round leader
David Antonelli

The Brabazon Trophy

The world's top amateurs swarmed to Cornwall this year for the English Championship. *GOLFPUNK* gawped at the skills on display and scouted the next big thing

Words: Richard Lenton
Photography: Paul Severn



Saturday, 9.30am. Ever had a hangover that's so overwhelming you're rendered temporarily paralysed? Right, retrace the footsteps... Tell my live-in girlfriend I'm going on holiday with my mates, huge row, nightclub, endless shots of Tuaca, *I Am The Resurrection*... Jesus, she's not here. There's a note, "You're nothing but a selfish...." I haven't got time for this, I've got to get to Cornwall.

3.30pm: Trevose Golf Club near Padstow, the setting for one of the most prestigious events on the amateur calendar, the English Strokeplay Championship. It's spitting with rain and the skies are as moody as a Z-list celeb who's just been turned away from Chinawhites. "Hi, it's Richard Lenton from *GOLFPUNK* magazine. Where is everyone?" "Sorry pal, play's been abandoned for the day. There's six inches of water on the greens..."

Sunday: My head's clearing with the weather. The view of the rugged north Cornwall coast from the opening tee box is as spectacular as a one-punch knockout at Madison Square Garden, and the biblical weather of yesterday is a distant memory as the sun glistens down on a Cornish stretch of the Atlantic Ocean that's as still as a millpond. On tee is arguably

England's greatest ever amateur golfer, Gary Wolstenholme, a man who famously slayed Tiger Woods en route to Walker Cup glory back in 1995. With 36 holes to be played today, the two-time British Amateur champion must reproduce the form that saw him overcome the game's greatest ever player if he's to close the gap on the leaders, which stands at six shots. After a handful of practice swings he stares at the precise patch of fairway that he intends to use as a landing strip. However, as he prepares to pull the trigger, there's a piercing squeaking noise, the sort of sound Joe Pasquale would make after catching his Jacobs' in the door. An ageing club member, oblivious to the importance of the occasion, is leisurely strolling past pulling a trolley that appears to have been designed during the days of ration books. I await the vitriol to spew from Gary's mouth. "Sounds like your knees have gone mate. Oh sorry, it's the trolley," he says, smiling. Somehow I can't imagine Monty reacting like that.

Confession time: this is my first ever golf tournament, and I'm as excited as a fat kid who's woken up to discover that the world's made of chocolate. I'm convinced that the next golfing superstar is here, today. After all, the great Sandy Lyle twice hauled the 61-year-old Brabazon Trophy

aloft – at Hollinwell in 1975 and at Royal Liverpool two years later. Unfortunately, that superstar in the making won't be our very own Daniel Willett, who's pulled out with fatigue. Tongues wag. Maybe he's about to turn pro. (*Hmmm, pg 142.*)

Because of Saturday's horrendous Cornish weather, only the first-round scores have counted towards qualification for the final 36 holes. "I feel sorry for that Billy Payne, the Devon boy," says an old guy to his wife. "He shot 66 in the rain yesterday, but it didn't count. He's missed the cut."

I head for the first tee, and watch one young tyro after another melt the ball into another galaxy with the efficiency of the Third Reich. I'd been warned that the standard of ball striking would be unlike anything I'd ever seen before, and I'm not disappointed. And I love the laid-back atmosphere. This is supposed to be an 'Inside the Ropes' piece, but, if there are any ropes to cordon off the spectators, then they're invisible. It's a free-for-all; fantastic. Is that really a group of rambles strolling across the path in front of the opening tee? Surreal ain't the word.

Call me a glory hunter but I'm going to follow the leading pair. "On tee, from Hornsea, Steven Uzzell." Hang on, I know

Danny who?



'Oi, microphone head, get out of the way...'



Spot the spectator...



Is this Sandy Lane?



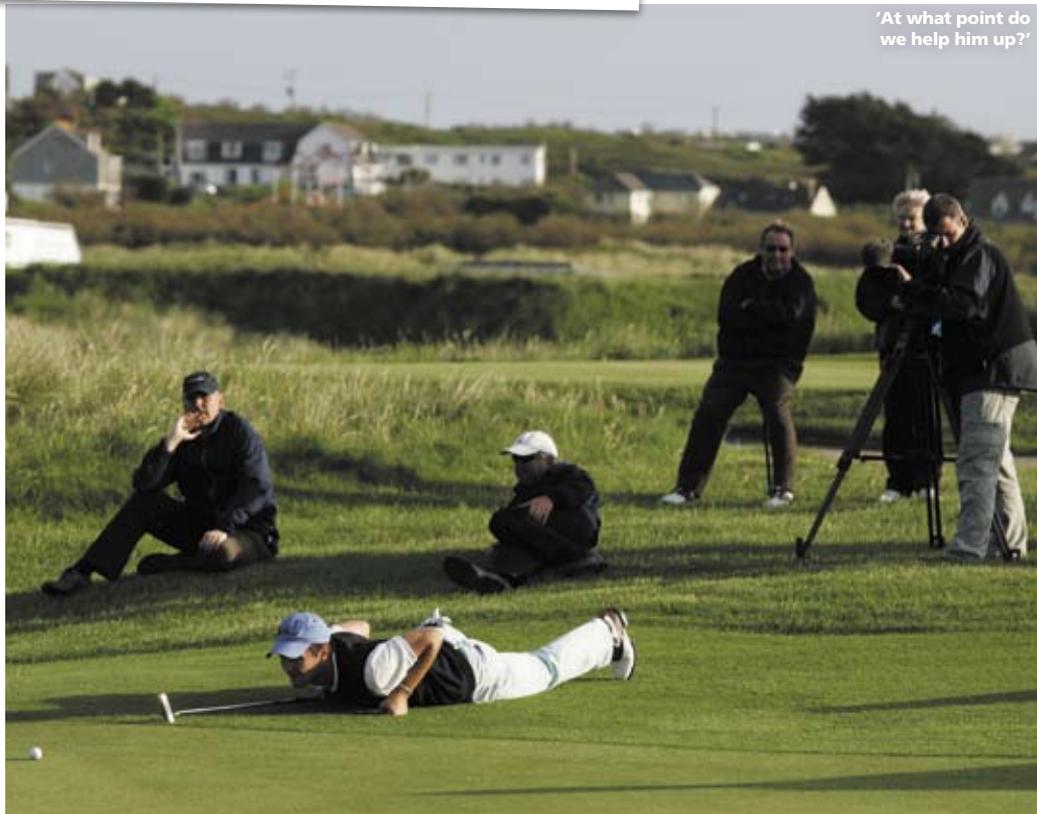
Hornsea. I used to go there in the school holidays – Hornsea Potteries, in fact. I'd happily sit at a potter's wheel for hours on end, cover myself in wet clay and make disfigured cups and saucers for my eternally grateful mother. Could it be *that* Hornsea?

The tall, languid left-hander rips a piercing drive down the tightly cut opening fairway. "I'm happy with that," he tells his caddy, fellow England Elite player Adam Wainwright, in a thick Yorkshire accent. Another Tyke – I'm following him.

His playing partner's a stocky Frenchman, David Antonelli, who shot 64 on the opening day to lead by two. Built like a pocket battleship, he smashes his ball to the left side of the fairway. The sound of metal connecting with dimpled rubber is like nothing I've heard before. The standard of play is phenomenal; these guys are professionals in all but name. Steven's like a precocious Manchester United teenager who's surely destined for a decent career in the paid ranks, whether it's at the Theatre of Dreams or some other respectable footballing outpost.

I'm with Steven on the breathtaking fourth hole. He's uncoiled a monster drive to leave himself 180-yards to a green that sits beneath the spectacular bay at Trevoise Head. His mid-iron second shot finds the

'At what point do we help him up?'



“THE SOUND OF METAL HITTING DIMPLED RUBBER IS UNLIKE ANYTHING I’VE HEARD BEFORE. THE STANDARD IS PHENOMENAL”



Looters head for the shore as another ship capsizes...

fringe to set up a two-putt birdie. Only he’s not happy with a birdie; his 40-foot, right to left eagle putt finds the cup, triggering an impromptu roar from the 30 or so spectators. David needs to hole his birdie putt to join Steven at the top of the leaderboard. He lays flat on his front in an attempt to judge the line, with scant regard for his Poulter-esque lilac trousers. But he misses the subtle undulation and his short putt lips out. He’s a shot adrift and Steven’s putter is in danger of catching fire.

I wander over to the Halfway House that’s situated behind the 10th green. Paul Cutler, who denied Rory McIlroy a third successive West of Ireland title last year, leaves a long putt way short and curses audibly. “Ooh I say,” says an elderly spectator in his best Frankie Howerd voice. Twenty-minutes later, another young man to watch, European Champion Benjamin Hebert, strolls onto the green, sucking on a fag like a man who’s destined for a date with the gallows in five minutes’ time. The level of intensity is visible on the youthful faces of these guys – the vast majority of whom aspire to join the professional elite and trouser tens of thousands of pounds for just a few days work. But they’ve got to serve their apprenticeships first.

Apparently Cutler and Hebert are right up there with the leaders, but there’s no leaderboard on course. I stroll back to the car park to check on the runners and riders. Uzzell’s ahead, but Hebert, Cutler, and young England pair Tom Lewis and the baby-faced Miles Mackman are closing in.

I head back on course to see Uzzell complete his final few holes. The bit-part actor and natural right-hander is in imperious form, in total control, while in stark contrast Antonelli is visibly battling his demons. His shoulders slump and he curses in French as another putt lips out. His iron play has, for the most part, looked solid, but his short game has fallen apart under the pressure imparted by his playing



STEVEN UZZELL

AGE 24

“I considered pulling out because my back was so bad. I couldn’t even play a practice round. All I did was walk the course. Winning the English title as an Englishman is something you dream about. You don’t think you can shoot 13-under in a day but I did it. I was in control of what I was doing. I putted great all day, which is the key to everything.”

partner, who’s putting like Monty in the Ryder Cup. Antonelli cards a 75 to Uzzell’s majestic, course record-equalling 64. The Yorkshireman leads by five shots; he’s now got 45-minutes to grab a butty before heading out for his fourth round.

The course is filling up appreciably, and there are more roars of excitement in any single five-minute spell than during the whole of this year’s Masters. Mackman’s making a charge, but then it all goes horribly, horribly wrong on the fifth as he hooks his tee shot way out of bounds at the 471-yard par-four. He looks forlorn. His mother, who’s caddying for him, wants to give her fresh-faced boy a big hug before handing him the cake tin to bury his cherubic features into. He cards a hideous eight; his challenge is over.

Hebert, Lewis and Zach Gould are threatening to make a concerted charge, but they’ll have to go some to stop Uzzell. I follow the leader down the first hole of the final round, where he proceeds to rattle in a 20-footer for birdie. Antonelli three-putts for bogey. If Uzzell can stay in the zone then it’s over. Time for some refreshment.

Here’s a tip if ever you’re in Trevoze, Cornwall, on a Sunday – make sure you’re not hungry between 5pm and 7pm. There’s nowhere open. I settle for a pint and a bag of nuts. It ain’t all caviar and cocktails at **GOLFPUNK**.

I’m back on course in time to see Uzzell smash another imperious drive down the 515-yard, par-five ninth to set up yet another birdie. A few days ago he could barely walk after pulling out of his England debut against France at Frilford Heath with a slipped disc, but here he is, wiping the floor with the supremely talented field.

He drops a shot at the treacherous 12th after failing to get up and down from just short of the green, and on 17 he three-putts for another, rare bogey. But he finishes like a champion, pinging a five-iron out of the rough on the left, over a tree and a devilish bunker and onto the raised green. His eight-footer rattles into the cup for a brilliant 67 and a three-round total of 197. He raises the putter that has served him so well above his head and the 200 or so spectators who have crowded round the green roar in unison. A worthy winner.

A TV crew try to grab an interview, but first thing’s first – he runs to his car to ring his family. It’s a lengthy conversation; so long that he unearths a football from the back of his motor and has a kickabout with his loyal caddy.

“I’m losing my sense of humour,” says the less than patient presenter. Luckily I haven’t got one to lose if you believe ‘er indoors... I take one last look at the spectacular coastline and head back to the car. I’ve got a relationship to repair... **GP**