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Injured Jeev out of Kensville Challenge

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Ahmedabad: The Gujarat Kensville Challenge 2011 received a big blow as Jeev Milkha Singh withdrew from the tournament owing to a bad back that has been troubling him for quite some time now. Jeev missed the Indian Open in New Delhi (December 25, 2010) due to a hip injury and was out of action for more than five weeks before returning to action in the Royal Trophy at Hua Hin in Thailand last weekend. Jeev was only a last minute entrant in Thailand where he lost at the 18th after Pablo Martin of Spain produced a magical 12-inch winning putt as Europe defeated Asia to retain the title.

Jeev was the star attraction at India's first ever European Challenge Tour event at the Kensville Golf and Country Club course which also is Jeev's signature golf course. He was all set to play in the tournament and had even played the pro-am paired with his father. The Flying Sikh Milkha Singh. His entire family — his mom, wife and little son Harjay — was at the Kensville waiting for the big moment. But after the pro-am, Jeev's back deteriorated and he was forced to withdraw, much to everybody's disappointment. Jeev has been troubled by injuries in the last two years and he worked really hard with yoga and some core workouts trying to get back to form at this event.

"I am feeling much better," he had said in the morning before the pro-am. He had also decided to cut down on his participation in tournaments from 37 in a year to 30 but as fate would have it, Jeev is back to square one, at least as far as his back is con-

cerned. Jeev has been replaced by Ashpreet Thind.

Former European Tour member Gaganjeet Bhullar will spearhead the home contingent, all of whom will be bidding to become the first Indian to win on the Challenge Tour. The winner will walk away with a cheque of Euro 32,000, while the runner-up will be richer by Euro 22,000. Bhullar's best performance on the European Tour came at the 2009 Barclays Singapore Open, where he finished tied 14th alongside South African Ernie Els, Thailand's Thongchai Jaidee, England's Justin Rose and American Phil Mickelson.

The other Indians to watch out are No.1 on the Order of Merit Ashok Kumar and young challenger Rashid Khan who plays his second event as a professional after bagging silver medal at Guangzhou Asian Games.

The foreigners who will be vying for the title include England's Charlie Ford and Italian Alessandro Tadini, who both tasted success last season on the Challenge Tour but were ultimately unable to graduate to the European Tour, after finishing 22nd and 25th respectively in the final rankings. Then there is Asian Tour event winner and No. 7 in Asian Tour Order of Merit Mohd Siddikur Rahman of Bangladesh who looked in good touch during the practice rounds and also in the pro-am.

At the other end of the experienced spectrum, the 114-man field also features a number of talented youngsters just making their way in the professional game. Tommy Fleetwood made quite an impression on the Challenge Tour last season, finishing runner-up twice in just six ap-



Gaganjeet Bhullar

pearances, including as an amateur at the English Challenge. His fellow Englishman Chris Lloyd, who at 18 is a year younger than Fleetwood, narrowly missed out on successfully navigating his way through all three stages of the 2010 Qualifying School, with a fifth round of 77 at the final stage effectively putting paid to his hopes of securing a European Tour card. Instead, Lloyd will now embark on his debut Challenge Tour campaign at the Gujarat Kensville Challenge, which is being co-sanctioned with the Professional Golf Tour of India (PGTI).

Despite the absence of big names, Jeev still believes it is a strong field and the difference from the main European Tour "may be just about 25 per cent".

"The top 20 players from the European Challenge Tour will play in the main Tour next year. They are all good players and it will be very hard to predict who will win on the weekend," said Jeev, adding, "The young Indians Bhullar, Lahiri, Ashok Kumar, Mukesh Kumar, Himmat Rai, Manav Jaini are going to make the competition tougher."

Jeev Milkha Singh swings at Kensville Golf & Country Club Course on Wednesday



Pic: Kevin Antao