China’s Day

[2019](https://www.hsbcgolf.com/latest-news/tag/2019/), [China Golf](https://www.hsbcgolf.com/latest-news/tag/china-golf/), [Li Haotong](https://www.hsbcgolf.com/latest-news/tag/li-haotong/), [Zhang Xinjun](https://www.hsbcgolf.com/latest-news/tag/zhang-xinjun/)

It was China’s day from start to finish at the WGC-HSBC Champions at Sheshan. The first player to tee off, Zhang Xinjun, handed in an opening 68 to show his compatriots the way and, late in the afternoon, Li Haotong was round in 64 to sign off at the top of the leaderboard with a one-shot advantage over Victor Perez, the Challenge Tour graduate who won the Dunhill Links Championship a month or so ago.

Meanwhile, the third slot on the leaderboard is occupied by Sungjae Im, Adam Scott, Matt Fitzpatrick and Xander Schauffele, the defending champion. Of that little lot, Schauffele was the surprise package in that he had had to pull out of the pro-am with a bug which had cost him his voice and left him “very sick”.

The course was in the best shape ever, while the weather was perfect for the occasion. However, it was far from easy. As one of the caddies opined early on, “strong men will be weeping out there…. The course is incredibly good and incredibly tough at the same time, which is as things should be when they are playing for so much money.”

Perez, who holed out from 140 yards and more for his eagle at the eighth, said much the same.  “It was a day when things could go both ways. The putting surfaces were perfect, but all the time you had to be hitting to the right sides of the green to give yourself a chance of getting down in two.”

Haotong remembers how, in 2015, he had a chance of winning the WGC-HSBC Champions, only to find himself too nervous in front of his home crowd to keep things together down the stretch. In the last four years, however, he has picked up on confidence and believes that he is now mentally equipped to get the job done should the chance arise. “I’m loving playing at home this time around.”

There were those who assumed that he would not be short of Chinese fans when he is playing on the PGA Tour which he now visits on a fairly regular basis but the answer was in the negative. His parents come to see him, but not too many others.  “But what about all those Chinese restaurateurs,” he was asked. He laughed at that. “There are plenty of them,” he nodded, “only they’re American-Chinese and golf isn’t really their thing.”

It might be one day….

Haotong is becoming a firm favourite on the European Tour, having set a win in last year’s Omega Dubai Desert Classic alongside the  Volvo China Open he won in 2016.  Last year, he collected his biggest purse to date –  €700,000 from finishing second in Turkey.

True, Rory McIlroy, the No 2 in the World, created something of a stir when he arrived back at base in a share of of seventh place following a 67 but, on any Richter Scale of cheers, the loudest applause and cheers belonged to our two Chinese heroes.

Haotong, though, was quick to advise his audience that there are three days to go. “Anything could happen, but I’ve got off a great start and it’s a joy to be where I am.”