

## 80TH P.G.A. CHAMPIONSHIP; Steady Hands Bring Singh His First Major Title

By CLIFTON BROWN  
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As he walked up the 18th fairway today en route to the most gratifying moment of his career, Vijay Singh was momentarily engulfed by the gallery rushing to congratulate him. But then Singh casually emerged from the crowd, calmly separating himself from everyone else.

Unflappable to the end, Singh was alone at the top, winning the P.G.A. Championship by trusting his newly consistent putting stroke and his reliable ball-striking, an ability formed through years of dedication and countless hours of practice. Prevailing over the challenge of Sahalee Country Club, a world-class field and the suffocating pressure that comes with Sunday afternoon, Singh won his first major championship.

Shooting a steady and resourceful two-under-par 68, Singh finished at nine-under 271 for the tournament, two strokes ahead of Steve Stricker and three better than Steve Elkington. Stricker shot a 70 today, and Elkington made a serious run with a final-round 67. Mark O'Meara, bidding to become the first player since Ben Hogan in 1953 to win three majors in one year, shot a 68 and tied for fourth.

It was the end of a long journey for Singh, whose career has carried him from his native Fiji to Malaysia, Nigeria, Morocco and finally to the PGA Tour, where he has earned a reputation as one of the game's hardest-working and most consistent players. But at 35, Singh felt a major championship was the missing piece in his career. So after today's victory, he felt a deep sense of satisfaction.

"I can't believe I've won this tournament," said Singh, moments after he had earned the first-place check of \$540,000. "I was laying awake last night at 2 o'clock, wondering what would happen today. My wife said, 'Are you asleep?' I said, 'Yeah, I'm asleep.' "

Actually, Singh was wide awake, thinking about his game plan, and today he executed it. Starting the day tied with Stricker, he took sole possession of the lead for good on the sixth hole. And while he could never relax, Singh made high-pressure shots and avoided the crucial mistakes that did in others.

The cap came on No. 17, a difficult 215-yard par 3 with water on the right side of the green and a bunker on the left. Singh held a one-stroke lead over Stricker, but with 17 and the even more difficult 18th hole ahead, the outcome was very much in doubt.

Both players felt the pressure, hitting their tee shots into the greenside bunker. But Singh recovered for par, while Stricker did not. Singh's bunker shot landed about 15 feet short of the pin, while Stricker hit his to within 12 feet. But Singh, using a new cross-handed putting style that he started last month, knocked in his putt to save par. Then Stricker missed just left of the hole, giving Singh a two-stroke lead.

Singh made a routine par at No. 18 and savored the victory, while Stricker thought about his own opportunity to win his first major that had slipped away.

"I struggled with my emotions and with my swing," said Stricker, who recorded his fifth top-10 finish in his last six starts. "I had an opportunity to put a little pressure on Vijay at No. 17, because I had first tee there, and I didn't hit a very good shot.

"To win this tournament would have meant a lot. It's hard not to let those thoughts creep into your mind. It's a little bit of a consolation finishing second, but I came here thinking I could win."

With the victory, Singh became the 10th player in the last 11 years to win his first major at the P.G.A. And he ended O'Meara's shot at history. O'Meara finished tied for fourth at four under par with Nick Price, whose 65 was the day's best score, and Frank Lickliter, who shot a 68. O'Meara made an early run, making a 40-foot putt for eagle at No. 2 and a birdie on No. 5 to pull within two strokes of the lead. But he bogeyed the next three holes.

"It would have been a tremendous honor to go alongside Ben Hogan's name, but it just wasn't meant to be," said O'Meara, winner of the Masters and the British Open.

One by one, the other contenders dropped off like dominoes, leaving Singh and Stricker to decide the outcome. Price eagled No. 11 to reach four under par, but he never made another birdie. Davis Love 3d, the defending champion, finished tied for seventh at 270, seeing his hopes ruined by a double bogey at No. 5, when he hit his tee shot into the water. Tiger Woods never made a charge and shot a 71, finishing tied for 10th. Elkington, the 1995 P.G.A. champion, made a serious bid, getting to within three strokes of the lead when he birdied No. 11 and to within two when he birdied No. 15. But his final hope ended when he bogeyed No. 18. Nevertheless, Elkington was encouraged by his third-place finish in a season that has been marred by sinus problems and meningitis.

"I'm making a comeback," he said. "But Vijay is a good friend of mine. He has worn that tag of being a good player that has never won a major. He has had an enormously difficult road to pick up that trophy."

Singh showed all his talents today, and he took advantage of breaks. On his second shot at the par-5 No. 11, Singh hit an errant 3-wood that hit a tree, but it ricocheted and rolled onto the green, stopping about 25 feet from the cup. Singh might not have got a better bounce had he hit the tree 100 times. From there, he two-putted for a birdie.

He got another break on No. 14, and made the most of it. After pulling his tee shot deep into the trees, he hit a delicate wedge shot through a

small opening and onto the green, showing his touch by hitting the ball left to right, the only shot he had out of the trees. Singh two-putted from 40 feet to save par, then made a crucial birdie on No. 15, hitting a radar-like pitching wedge to within 8 feet of the hole, then making the putt.

"After 14, I just started to concentrate harder on what I was doing," Singh said. "I didn't want it to slip away."

It did not. Singh finally had his long-sought major. Vijay means victory in Hindi. And today, the name fit. "To win one of these is like a dream," Singh said. "I have to wait for it to sink in."

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