**REVIEW OF 2017 GENESIS VICTORIAN OPEN RACQUETBALL CHAMPIONSHIPS**

**(SEE SEPARATE PAGES FOR PHOTOS OF SINGLES AND DOUBLES PRIZE WINNERS)**

**LEGENDS PREVAIL AT GENESIS VICTORIAN OPEN RACQUETBALL CHAMPIONSHIPS**

Although their playing of tournaments in 2017 has been severely restricted by business responsibilities, the King and Queen of Australian Racquetball, fifteen times Australian Open Men’s Champion Cam White, and eight times Australian Open Women’s Champion Sarah Fitz-Gerald, continued their unbeaten runs when they both won their respective Open Singles events at the 35th edition of the Genesis Victorian Open Racquetball Championships, which is Australia’s longest running racquetball tournament.

Through these wins, White has now won fifteen Victorian Open titles, with Fitz-Gerald claiming her sixth Victorian Open crown, with both extending their undefeated status in racquetball to sixteen and nine years respectively.

Coincidentally, White has also won five Victorian Open Squash titles, the second highest on record with only the great Geoff Hunt ahead of him with ten titles under his belt; and Fitz-Gerald has also won her home state Open Women’s Squash crown on five occasions, not quite as many as another great in Heather McKay who won it thirteen years in succession from 1961 to 1973.

Special thanks to My Sport Live for their excellent live streaming of nine hours of singles play which provided extensive exposure of Australian Racquetball to both Australian and international audiences, plus launched the media careers of eight of our Open players.

**SINGLES EVENTS**

MEN’S OPEN

Although this event contained a red hot field, there was great expectation surrounding the possibility of a Cam White versus Callan Hall final following Hall’s steamrolling of a talented field in the Geelong Open just three weeks earlier.

The expectation became a reality when White and Hall blasted their way through opposite sides of the draw which included taking out 2016 Victorian Open finalists, Peter French by White, 21/7, 21/8, and Steve Andrewartha by Hall, 21/10, 21/18, in their respective semi finals.

Both games in the final took a similar path, with White quick out of the blocks and taking control early with his impeccable length and width, plus invoking his incredible short game, and reaching what seemed to be an impregnable position, before Hall would stage an incredible fight back to fully extend the champion.

Leading 19/10, White looked set to comfortably take out the first game, but as quick as a flash the South African became the aggressor claiming seven of the next eight points, with some unbelievable nick winners, to reduce the margin to just three points, whereupon White closed it out 21/17.

Mirroring the first game, White skipped out to a ten point lead at 18/8 in the second game before Hall once again chanced his eye with some amazing shots recovering to 14/19, before White steadied taking the game 21/15, and annexing his fifteenth Victorian Men’s Open title.

WOMEN’S OPEN

This event saw the return of the Queen of Australian Racquetball Sarah Fitz-Gerald, who swapped her Court Tech squash court building tools for a racquetball racquet, for the first time since the Australian Open held in October last year.

With Fitz-Gerald at prohibitive odds to win the event, the greatest interest focussed on who was going to reign supreme for the runners-up booty, which ended up being 2016 Tasmanian Women’s Open winner Kristel Proctor, who finally succumbed to Fitz-Gerald, 8/21, 7/21.

In their respective semi finals, Fitz-Gerald defeated Leah Boulton, 21/9, 21/17; with Proctor taking out a nail biter over Geelong’s third seeded Sue Dunlop, 16/21, 21/14, 21/19.

A GRADE

This was an outstanding A Grade field which included 2016 National and Victorian A Grade GP Champion Chris Rollauer, and a relative newcomer to racquetball Maccabi’s Anthony Hain, who was runner up to Alex Baines in the 2016 Australian Open A Grade event and is the current Victorian A Grade GP leader.

 After ousting local hope Jamie Evans, 21/11, 21/13 in their quarter final, second seeded Hain faced off against Corio’s great warhorse Adam Lander in a precursor to the final, following his marathon three game victory over Albury’s Tim Paramore. Although Lander would not lie down, Hain held firm taking the match 21/14, 21/12.

In the other semi final, Mt. District’s Rob Hay, who had spent most of 2016 on the sidelines, and had accounted for top seeded Rollauer in their quarter final 21/14, 21/10, was then confronted by Wangaratta’s third seeded Dean Milligan who had been pushed to the limit by Mulgrave’s Craig Royale-Young, eventually coming out on top, 12/21, 21/16, 21/19.

In the final Hain skipped to an early lead and was never headed in either game, prevailing 21/6, 21/10, and claiming successive A Grade GP titles.

B GRADE

Adelaide journeyman Dave Whan has played in more tournaments than the average person has had ‘hot breakfasts’ and to boot on most occasions finds himself around the pointy end of the event.

Whan is also using racquetball to build up his fitness levels up in his pursuit to climb Mt. Everest during September/October this year, then return to challenge for the Australian Open B Grade title to be held in Albury 13- 15 October.

 Whan again found himself at the event’s climax after overpowering Ballarat’s Paul Bedford 21/9 in the third game of their quarter final encounter, and Wangaratta stalwart Jason Hawkins, in the semi final, 21/18, 21/6, to set up an intriguing final with Mulgrave’s Matt Bayley, who was playing in only his third GP event.

 To reach the final, Bayley had accounted for Lakes Entrance’s Steve Theologou, Geelong’s second seeded John Phillips, and Westerfold’s third seeded and former world deaf squash champion Peter Walters, all in straight games.

Bayley showed that he was destined for richer pickings when he overcame the top seeded Whan, 21/10, 21/4 in the final.

C GRADE

The C Grade event was littered with players of varying ages from across the state, including fourteen year old twins from Westerfolds, Philip and Spencer Gerontzos, and Mt. District’s sixteen year old Sam Koper.

One of the most improved players on the GP circuits over the past nine months has been Ballarat’s Blake Caspersz, claiming the Ballarat and Geelong C Grade titles, plus being runner up in the 2016 Australian Open C Grade event, which posited him in the seedings to meet 2016 Victorian C Grade GP champion Michael Smits in the final.

After surviving a marathon 21/17 in the third win in the first round over Shepparton’s Andrew Meredith, Philip Gerontzos proceeded to take out top seeded Smits and fifth seeded Albury’s Ross Falconer in straight games to reach his first C Grade final.

Although slowly working his way into each encounter, Caspersz was able to come from behind in each of his quarter and semi final matches, firstly against Albury’s Michael Brigden, 16/21, 21/15, 21/10, then 13/21, 21/18, 22/21, in a thriller against Koper. Koper had earlier defeated Spencer Gerontzos, 22/20, 21/17, and third seeded and host club President Lao Biesbroek, 21/17, 21/12.

Caspersz made it successive GP titles taking out the final stanza over Philip, 21/13, 21/14, but everyone watching this event was left in no doubt that several players who played in this event will be scaling into the higher grades very quickly.

D GRADE

The D Grade event contained two GP debutants, Mt. District’s Rohani Sherren and Gladstone Park’s Zac Thomas, which ended with both playing off for the major spoils.

To reach the final, Thomas overcame Corio stalwart Ben Bell, 21/18, 12/21, 21/12, and Sherren held out Westerfold’s Calista Gerontzos, 21/15, 21/15.

In a see-sawing encounter, Sherren eventually came up trumps when she claimed the one hundred and ninth point and the match, 21/18, 11/21, 21/17.

E GRADE

Six members of Albury’s Brigden family entered these championship with three in this event, Mother Cheryl, plus siblings Lillian and Alexander, but it was second seeded Mulgrave’s Emily Cooper who stole the show, coming back from a game down in the final against Cheryl to finally get over the line, 16/21, 21/18, 21/17.

Their pathway to the final included Cooper also coming from a game down to hold out Alexander, 15/21, 21/16,, 21/13, and Cheryl overcoming Dromana’s Mandy Dowsett, 21/13, 21/14, in their respective semi finals.

F GRADE

Following some playoffs in the E Grade event, Wangaratta’s Cooper Hawkins faced off against Corio’s Danica Morgan in the final with the fourteen year old Hawkins claiming not only the title by defeating Morgan, 21/9, 21/3, but also bragging rights over his father on the trip back home, as Jason departed at the semi stage in his B Grade event.

JUNIOR BOY’S & GIRLS UNDER 13

Following an extensive round of matches between both groups, Caulfield Park’s Pranay Bhutani took out the Boy’s event when he defeated Albury’s Xavier Brigden, 21/4, 21/10, and Corio’s Ella Partington won a thriller against Xavier’s younger sister Amelia, 21/19, 16/21, 21/13, to claim the Girl’s title.

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| SINGLES |
| Grade | **Winner** |  **Runner-Up** |
| Men’s Open  | Cam White  |  Callan Hall |
| Women’s Open | Sarah Fitz-Gerald  |  Kristel Proctor |
| A  | Anthony Hain |  Dean Milligan |
| B | Matt Bayley |  Dave Whan |
| C | Blake Caspersz  |  Philip Gerontzos |
| D  | Rohani Sherren |  Zac Thomas |
| E  |  Emily Cooper |  Cheryl Brigden |
| F  |  Cooper Hawkins |  Danica Morgan |
| Junior Girls  | Ella Partington |  Amelia Brigden |
| Junior Boy’s  | Pranay Bhutani |  Xavier Brigden |

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| DOUBLES |
| Grade Winners- Runners-Up |
| Open Geoff Wilcock/Steve Andrewartha Garry Pedersen/Peter French  |
| A James Long/Simon Binda Anthony Hain/Kristel Proctor |
| B Lance Cowan/Brett Kirchner Dave Whan/John Phillips  |
| C Marcel & Sam Koper Paul Swan/Ben Bell  |
| D Tim Hill/Don House Robyn Kasperski/Rohani Sherren |
| E Tony Gerard/Jack Oster Ella Partington/Jackson Lander-Mitchell |
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PHOTOS: Courtesy of Jodi Wilkinson