**Saxon leads Voke, Jin, Zemmer at Zhuhai Championship**

ZHUHAI, China—Under ideal scoring conditions, Order of Merit leader Charlie Saxon fired a 7-under 64 Thursday to take a two-shot lead after the first round of the Zhuhai Championship. The result shouldn’t be too surprising since Saxon won his second PGA TOUR Series-China title in November 2016 here at Orient Golf Club on his way to finishing second on the Order of Merit.

Saxon, who has also won twice on this Tour this year, carded an eagle and six birdies, and he leads New Zealand’s Nick Voke, China’s Daxing Jin and Italy’s Aron Zemmer. Voke is seeking his third consecutive win.

Saxon birdied his opening hole, starting at No. 10, added birdies at the next even-numbered holes and then eagled the par-5 18th to make the turn at 6-under. He started his back nine birdie-bogey before picking up a final birdie on No. 7, his 16th hole of the day.

After a tie for 31st at last week’s Macau Championship, Saxon talked with his management team and appears to have regained his focus as he bids for a record fifth career title on the Tour and his third of the season.

“Something me and my agent talked about is just playing each shot at hand and not getting ahead of yourself. Not trying to shoot a number but just playing your hand as well as you can. I did a great job of that,” said Saxon. “I had a hot putter today, and it has been a while since I’ve had that. I kept plotting around all day and didn’t get ahead of myself, so I’m really happy with how it turned out.”

The 25-year-old Oklahoman is enjoying his return to the course, while many other players are struggling with its intricacies due to its narrow fairways and water hazards on almost every hole.

“I love this golf course. It’s a ball-striker’s paradise. You either hit it good, or you don’t play well, and fortunately ball-striking is one of my strengths. I stayed patient and played really well,” said Saxon, who played golf at the University of Oklahoma.

“It’s always great to come to a golf course where you have good vibes. You draw on some of those memories and it gives you confidence while you are out there.”

The 23-year-old Voke is bidding for a record-breaking third successive title and did nothing to hurt his chances. He got off to another hot start, carding six birdies against just one bogey.

Having turned pro in January, Voke is in a strong position to finish inside the top five on the final money list to secure status for the 2019 Web.com Tour. Mathematically, there is still the chance he could overtake Saxon if he can continue his winning ways in the last two events.

“I’m feeling good. It’s nice that from this position I’m able to relax a little bit more,” said Voke, who graduated from Iowa State University in 2017.

“However, I know this golf course is really challenging and Its quite easy to lose shots. I’ll be playing quite conservatively from now on and hopefully the luck falls my way.”

Jin, who is 20th on the Order of Merit, has yet to win on Tour but continues his strong play. The 25-year-old opened play with back-to-back birdies before picking up four more birdies and a bogey as the wind picked up.

“This course is very difficult and requires precise shots off the tee to create birdie opportunities. Fortunately, I was very good off the tee and played smart. I basically made no mistakes, so I am happy with the result,” said Jin. “My strategy [Friday] will be to continue to play steady. I think I can do well if I can maintain today’s form and level.”

England’s Callum Tarren and South Korea’s Todd Baek, second and fourth, respectively, on the Order of Merit, each shot 69 to share fifth with Sweden’s Oskar Arvidsson and the American trio of Seungjae Maeng, Charlie Netzel and Sejun Yoon.