**Saxon leads Voke as Chen charges at Zhuhai Championship**

ZHUHAI, China—Order of Merit leader Charlie Saxon survived a mid-round wobble Friday—a double bogey-bogey, two-hole stretch—to still card a 1-over 72 and take a one-shot lead over New Zealand’s Nick Voke at the halfway stage of the Zhuhai Championship, the penultimate event of this year’s PGA TOUR Series-China.

Zhuhai native Zihao Chen shot a 4-under 67, one of only five sub-70 rounds Friday, to charge into third, at 3-under, in the event at Orient Golf Club.

Early in his round, it looked like Saxon was going to pull away and build on his opening-round 64, playing at the same venue where he won his second PGA TOUR Series-China title, in November 2016. Then the Oklahoman ran into a bit of trouble.

After starting with seven successive pars, Saxon followed a double bogey on No. 8 with a bogey on the ninth to make the turn at 3-over. He did fight back with birdies on Nos. 13 and 16.

On the par-3 eighth, Saxon’s tee shot went into heavy bushes, requiring him to take a penalty. After dropping and chipping to eight feet, he missed his bogey putt.

“I turned at 3-over after two sloppy holes, but then I played a nice back nine to fight my way back and post a respectable score, so considering the front nine, overall I’m happy with how the day went,” said Saxon, who is bidding for his third Tour title of the 2018 season and a record fifth career win on the Tour. A win this week would also cement him as the 2018 Order of Merit winner.

“It was one of those days I could have easily shot 5-over, and I only shot 1-over, so I’m in a good spot and I just need to keep grinding.”

Saxon is excited about Saturday’s grouping with Voke, third on the Order of Merit after winning the last two events, and Chen, who has played every season of the Tour since its inauguration in 2014.

“It will be fun to play with Nick. He’s become a good friend here in the last few weeks, we’ve played a few practice rounds together and he’s a great guy,” said Saxon. “He’s a very good player, so we’re going to have a really good time out there, hopefully play some good golf and have a good battle.”

Voke, a 23-year-old native of Auckland, New Zealand, is bidding for a record-breaking third consecutive win and will start Saturday just one behind after an even-par round featuring three birdies, one bogey and a double bogey. He was 1-over for the day standing on the 18th tee but then ended his day on a high note, making a short birdie putt.

“Today was a mixed bag, to be honest. I got off to quite a nice start, was 2-under through five holes. But just the nature of this golf course, I knew there was danger lurking around the corner, so unfortunately it happened to me on Nos. 7 and 8,” said Voke of his 3-over, two-hole stretch at the end of his opening nine.

“But I shot even-par, which is an OK result today. I’m still in a good spot, so I’m happy to be where I am. Anything can still happen.”

Chen, who was born and raised in Zhuhai, picked up four birdies in a bogey-free round, including a 40-foot par-saving putt on the 18th hole after his drive went int the hazard on the left side, will be looking to carry his good form into the weekend where he expects strong support from friends and local golf fans.

“I was much more stable today than yesterday, and I had no mistakes off the tee. My putter was also great today, and I relied on it a lot,” said the 22-year-old, who’s looking for his first Tour win. “I’m excited for the weekend because some of my friends will come to watch, and I enjoy playing in front of spectators, so I hope I can play well again this weekend.”

Tied for fourth are China’s Daxing Jin and Italy’s Aron Zemmer, who both shot 74 Friday. England’s Callum Tarren and South Korea’s Todd Baek, second and fourth on the Order of Merit, respectively, used 72s Friday to finish the day sharing sixth place, at 1-under, with two-time Tour winners Gunn Charoenkul and Huilin Zhang, Zeming He, Seungjae Maeng and Kevin Techakanokboon.

The cut came at 8-over, with 67 players advancing to the weekend.