



Garden City welcomes the game's greats

New Zealand's Garden City, Christchurch, was in full bloom on Monday when it welcomed international athletes representing no fewer than eighteen countries from around the region to these 2015 Asia Pacific Bowls Championships.

And yesterday those same athletes responded to the open-armed hospitality in kind by producing exquisite bowls in high winds on treacherously fast greens at the Burnside and Papanui Bowling Clubs. It was magical stuff.

The first day of hostilities also welcomed two of New Zealand's most-admired competitors back to the international stage. Triples skipper Paul Girdler, who last wore the coveted Blackjacks livery at Ayr in Scotland during the 2004 world championships; while pairs leader Mike Kernaghan bowed out of the limelight after his singles bronze medal finish at the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester.

Girdler took little time to adjust back into the big time when he, along with partners Andrew Kelly and Mike Nagy, eclipsed their opponents from India 43-1 in the first round.

However, it wasn't until the second round that Kernaghan again tasted international success, when he and skipper Shannon McIlroy clinched an eight-shot win over Brunei, then completed their day's work with an



• *The Blackjacks trio of Andrew Kelly, Mike Nagy and Paul Girdler.*

emphatic victory against China to lead their section overnight.

Another newsmaker to arrive in Christchurch this week is Malaysia's Emma Saroji, who defeated Nici Neal from South Africa to lift the women's World Singles Champion of Champions crown last Sunday at Helensvale on Australia's Gold Coast.

So... Take a bow Christchurch! This is almost certainly the first time in history that the current holders of every major womens singles title in the game have assembled at the same competition.

Let's start with Saroji, the sport's newest superstar; then there's her Malaysian teammate Siti Zalina Ahmad, the reigning World Cup champion; Australia's Karen Murphy, the incumbent World Singles champion from Adelaide in 2012; and of course there's world number one Jo Edwards from New Zealand, who clinched the Commonwealth Games singles gold medal in Glasgow last year.

During this week there will be accounts of shock results along with the mandatory collection of hard and good luck stories emerging from this gathering of the sport's finest from the Asia Pacific theatre.

There was nearly one in round two of the women's singles when local ace Jo Edwards trailed 14-20 against Teokotai Rahui Jim from the Cook Islands in their race to twenty-one. However, showing the greatness that has taken her to the mantle of world's premier player, Edwards found a way to graft out the necessary seven shots for victory and is unbeaten in her section.

And while on 'unbeaten', what about Johnny Ng and Su Hong Lam from Macao, who are undefeated after their two men's pairs starts yesterday? Both of their matches ended in a tie - against India and the top Malaysian combination of Fairul Muin and Hizlee Rais. Their joy was impossible to disguise.