



>> Padraig Harrington

won his third PGA Irish Region Championship at the new Palmerstown House course – he plans to defend his title later this year.

Palmerstown

the **star** in season of tight finishes

The year in review by Tony McGee

Probably the highlight of the 2005 Irish Professional Golf scene was not carved out in competition but was created by the opening of the PGA National at Palmerstown. This €36m project is a status symbol that creates a new image for the **PGA Irish Region.**

The state-of-the-art €16m clubhouse on its own is a shop window for the region. It shows a progression that must be the envy of many other bodies and great credit is due to Jim Mansfield for his foresight in building the complex that is sure to host a major 'outside' event in the not-too-distant future.

It has already created a bit of history by staging the PGA Irish Region Championship last September and, in doing so, possibly created a world record. It is doubtful if any other course hosted a national championship within

six months of having the tapes cut on the place.

No doubt, Padraig Harrington is delighted that he reconsidered his decision not to play in the €140,000 event. Second thoughts proved best for the world star as he won the title for a third time and collected the first prize of €20,000 from the Cuisine de France and Simple Overseas Properties-backed tournament. But he didn't get it easy.

Harrington had to survive a shootout with Lisburn club professional Stephen Hamill and fellow European Tour player Damien McGrane before emerging the winner again. Harrington only entered the championship the previous weekend, having earlier in the year decided not to defend the title.

"I spoke to a few people on the Friday before the event and had a think about things. It was then that I decided to play and I'm glad that I did," reflected Padraig after holing the winning putt at the first tie-hole.

Immediately, Harrington set about serving notice that he had no intentions of handing over the title. After the first round he shared the lead on 71 with Paddock Wood's Cathal Barry with Peter Lawrie and Gary Wardlow, who was then playing out of Knockbracken, biting at their heels on 73.

Day 2 saw Harrington out front on his own at the halfway cut after adding a 70 but, with a super 68, McGrane had crept up the leaderboard to second place just one stroke adrift. Irish Region players Stephen Hamill and Francis Howley shared third place with Lawrie, Hamill having carded 69.

It was then that the real battle began. McGrane, after a third round 69, went into the last day's play one stroke ahead of Harrington with Hamill, having posted a 70, third and Howley fourth as four shots separated the top four players. The final day produced matchplay style golf.

Hamill was the man who shot into the limelight. He made four birdies to the



>> **David Mortimer** who shared the McCambridge and Duffy Pro-Am at the City of Derry with Damian Mooney and Brendan McGovern.



After topping the Order of Merit in 2004, >> **Brendan McGovern** had another highly encouraging season and shared the McCambridge and Duffy Pro-Am at the City of Derry with Damian Mooney and David Mortimer.

turn and another at the 10th to move to five-under for the championship and into the lead. When Harrington three-putted the 17th green from 25 feet the fat was in the fire. McGrane eagled the ninth to slip into the frame. Hamill, ahead, finished at three-under for the tournament after his drive at 18 was blocked into threes and his wedge to the green kicked off the surface.

To stay in the race, McGrane pitched to six inches at the last to finish at minus-

three and Harrington found sand but saved his chance of keeping the title by chipping to one foot past the flag and rolling in the return.

The 18th hole was again used for the shootout. McGrane missed the green, chipped to 12 feet and missed for bogey five. Hamill found greenside sand, blasted out 10 feet past and his return slipped past the hole, also for bogey five. Harrington was on the green 20 feet from the flag and safely got down

in two stabs for par and keep the title.

"I'm delighted to win the title again and it gives me great confidence for the Seve Trophy and the Dunhill tournament that lies ahead," commented the champion.

It was a great week for Lisburn Club pro Hamill. "I'm disappointed because I might never get the chance again," reflected Stephen. "On the other hand, I'm delighted to have been involved in the play-off. It's great to get that close."

Promised McGrane: "Padraig gave us a bit of a chance but I'll have my day in this championship." The Meath man and Hamill each collected a cheque for €10,750.

While the Irish Championship is the flagship tournament of the year there are other very important events, as well. There are the Ulster and Southern Championships, the Irish Club Professionals' Championship and the Assistants' Championship plus a number of major pro-am tournaments.

Huddersfield-born Simon Thornton, attached to Royal County Down, chalked up a notable double by winning the Ulster title and the Club Professionals' event. That helped him greatly on his way to the top of Srixon Order of Merit for the season.

At Castle Hume in August, Thornton returned scores of 73 and 68 to edge out Chris Moriarty by one shot and take the Ulster crown. After the first round it was Moriarty, Paul Vaughan and former winner Phillip Collins who topped the leaderboard on 71 but Thornton took a grip of the title over the closing nine holes. He made five birdies from the 11th hole, finishing with a three to nip in front of Moriarty whose runner-up spot was his fifth of the season.

Johnny Foster, with six birdies in his last 12 holes, shot into third place but the comeback of the event was that produced by Damian Mooney. He opened with a horrendous 79 and clipped 14 shots off that second time out, making five birdies and an eagle and also suffering a penalty shot when he went into the lake. In the first round he signed for a 79 when the actual score was 78. That was two shots he lost over the two rounds – shots that would have brought him up to joint second instead of joint fourth.

The one-day Canada Life Southern Championship at The Heath was won by Peter Jones after a play-off with Gary Madden, Jones making birdie four at the first tie-hole.

Lisburn hosted the Club Professionals' Championship, which also ended in a shootout with Simon Thornton shaking off Michael Collins and John Dwyer. The competition finished in gathering darkness as four extra holes were needed to decide the winner.

Dwyer dropped out after three holes, failing to match the birdies of Thornton and Collins. Thornton then clinched the honours with another birdie to Collins' par at the fourth tie-hole.

Feature of the second round was the performance of David Ryan. The Cork man pencilled in eight birdies and a bogey over his opening 12 holes but then the wheels came off and he had to settle for a three-under-69 and joint fifth place.

Mark Staunton and Chris Moriarty shared the lead at the halfway stage in the Red Bull Irish Assistants' Championship at City West's championship course but



>> **Damien McGrane**...pipped by Padriag Harrington in a play-off at Palmerstown. But the Meath man will take considerable heart from his impressive performances as a Tour pro in 2005

McGrane went one better at Dundrum House as he topped the leaderboard there, carding rounds of 69 and 70. Ian Kerr swept into the overnight lead with a four-under-par 68 but posted a 74 from the second round to finish fourth behind joint second Chris Moriarty and Brendan McGovern.

The 3Ts Tournament National final was won by Newlands, represented by professional Karl O'Donnell, club captain Bill Dunne, Aidan McNamee and Mary O'Mahoney. They took the Irish title at The K Club and then went on to win the international decider, as well, at Erinvale, South Africa.

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Moriarty nipped ahead by two shots after the third round. However, Staunton stormed back to take the honours with a closing 70 for 284 against Moriarty's 73 for 285.

The winner had already taken the leading qualifier's spot for the PGA National Assistants' Championship at Royal Tara while Gary Wardlow's 69 at Ardee earned him the Royal Sun Assistants' title.

The season's schedule showed close on 50 pro-am tournaments from one to three-day events. Among the bigger ones were the Quinn Direct Charity Trophy at Slieve Russell and Willie Crowe's annual at Dundrum House, backed by Philip Walton.

Stephen Browne took his first title on the Irish Tour when he won the €70,000 event at Slieve Russell with rounds of 67 and 70. He finished two shots ahead of Damien McGrane with Francis Howley on 141 with David Higgins a further stroke back.

The McCambridge and Duffy pro-am at City of Derry is a three-day weekend event and it finished in a tie as David Mortimer, Damian Mooney and Brendan McGovern shared a 54-holes total of regulation 213, Mortimer closing with a 68.

The Killester Travel Greenore Challenge Trophy was won by Jimmy Bolger on nine-under-par 133. He shared the overnight lead with Barry Hamill and Damien McGrane at four-under-67 and went a shot better second time out. Bolger had 12 birdies over the 36 holes.

Seve Ballesteros played in the €50,000 Heritage Challenge at Killenard but had to retire with his recurring back injury during the second round. The event produced a three-way tie with Philip Walton, Robert Giles and Neil Manchip sharing 145 and splitting the top honours.

Ardglass pair Philip Farrell and amateur Justin Sharvin won the Irish section of the Lombard Trophy Tournament at Seapoint in July. They booked their tickets to the cross-channel final on the back nine, edging out Ballyliffin's John P Dolan and Justin Theseria after the duos shared seven-under-65.

John McHenry won the Glenmuir qualifier while John Dwyer and Leslie Walker topped the leaderboard at the Glenbrae Fourball qualifier. Johnny Young and his Rosslare club captain Nick O'Connor qualified for the Bahrain final of the Gulf Air International Pro/Captain's Tournament but were unable to travel.

Their place went to second-placed Wexford pair Liam Bowler and John Quigley. It was Bowler's second year in a row to reach the international final. He was in Bahrain representing St Helen's Bay in 2004.