midst the plethora of corporate golf events, there’s one that stands out, year after year. Everyone who is anyone in the upper echelons of India Incorporated hopes to play with the land’s top professional golfers.

And, it was no different at the 15th BT-Honda Pro-Am that saw winners of the eastern, western and southern legs of the tournament congregate at the Jack Nicklaus Signature course at the ITC Classic Golf Resort, an oasis nestled in the rocky Aravalli Range at Tauru, an hour-and-a-half drive from the national capital, on a bright and unusually hot morning on March 28 for the grand finale.

Every year, the four-leg tournament visits Bengaluru, Kolkata and Mumbai before moving to Delhi for the Finals. Winners of each of the legs congregate in the nation’s political centre to mix with the top corporate swingers from the National Capital Region. Throw in the best performers from the country’s domestic pro circuit, and you have a brew that’s as fizzy as the after-round drink.

And in the heat, that drink was a welcome thirst quencher once the golf was over. Delhi’s denizens have been trying to figure out what on earth happened to the city’s delectable spring season. Summer, this
Ashok Kumar, the overall runner-up in the Pro category

Professional golfer Sujjan Singh led a team of debutants

Vikram Kapoor of SAAB Travels, overall winner of BT Straightest Drive on Day 1

Shobhodip Pal of Hewlett Packard, winner of the Closest to Pin prize on Day 2
time around, seems to have followed hot on the heels, literally, of a bracingly chilly winter. But, golfers being golfers, addicts of the game who’ll find any excuse to play (come rain or shine), a blazing March sun was hardly going to put them off playing.

It certainly didn’t put off R.C. Bhargava, Chairman, Maruti Suzuki Ltd., from teeing it up. Bhargava has taken part in the BT Pro-Am many a time. “It’s a fun place to come to. I enjoy it,” he says. “You meet people you otherwise don’t normally come across.” The bespectacled Bhargava tries to get in a round on weekends. “Time is a problem. I can only manage Sundays.”

Asked whether a “golfing culture” exists in Maruti Suzuki, Bhargava says, “Well, there are a lot of Japanese in the organisation, and most of them play golf.” Surely, if a CEO, or MD or chairman, displays a penchant for the game, it can rub off on employees—a gentle (or fiercely competitive) 18 (or nine) holes can help banish the pressures of the boardroom.

Chander Uday Singh, a senior Delhi-based advocate, and Rahul Maroli (Head, Operations, LeasePlan India Ltd.), also regulars at the annual corporate-professional get-together, would agree. Both try to fit in a few holes of golf every weekend. “I was earlier working out of Mumbai, and would play the Bombay Presidency cc, or Willingdon or the us, on the weekends,” says Singh. “But since shifting to Delhi, I’m neither here nor there! What with the traveling, I can’t seem to find the time to tee it up.”

However, its good riddance to the cliché that corporate honchos “network” on the golf course. They may very well meet up on the fairways and greens, often as part of a foursome or fourball, but very rarely are deals made amid perfectly struck irons or disheartening three-putts. That’s a myth that probably deserves a hasty burial. “I am a doctor, so when I’m playing, people come up to me for free advice!” says former Air Force man, Dr. (Group Captain) G.S. Sabhikhi, now Director, Radiodiagnosis and Imaging, Super Religare Laboratories Ltd., who was debuting in the BT Pro-Am.

Networking, adds Chander Singh, may be a by-product of an encounter on the course. Agrees Maroli: “I’ve done business with people whom I have met on the golf course, which is a good place to make new acquaintances. But business has only come later, and not while playing.”

So, an extension of the boardroom to the golf course most certainly is not. And because corporate golfers who play together are already well acquainted, there is, Singh emphasizes, already a “comfort level” that won’t allow “business” to enter the conversation. But there would, need-
less to say, be plenty of good-natured ribbing. “There’s a lot of camaraderie amongst golfers,” says Maroli.

Meanwhile, Asoka Iyer (Head, Group Advisory Services, Apollo Tyres), Kavi Arora (CEO, Religare Finvest Ltd.), and Harpreet Singh (Chief Operating Officer, Bharti Airtel Ltd.) were playing the BT Pro-Am for the first time, and each confessed to having a splendid time. “It was good fun playing with (pro partner) Sujjan Singh. I found him a really nice guy, and we chatted about golf,” says Iyer, who looks to play “one-and-a-half” times every week. “Ours was a nice foursome, and overall it was a great experience,” he adds.

Arora, who besides golf has played hockey and cricket, had the good fortune to be in the same quartet as Jyoti Randhawa (recently appointed brand ambassador of Religare). “Jyoti gave me a couple of tips which worked a treat. On some holes, I was actually out-driving him! Unfortunately, I just missed out on the ‘longest drive’ and ‘closest to the pin’ awards.”

“W ell-organised” are two words that always seem to be associated with the event, and Arora and Harpreet Singh were among many to praise the conduct of their Pro-Am. “I really enjoyed myself,” raves Arora. “My fourball was great!” The tournament’s concept, feels Harpreet Singh, is a good one. “Prize money on offer encourages the pros to play. Also, it is hosted at a top-class layout.”

For the record, Ali Sher, legend of Indian golf, guided his team of Chander Uday Singh, Ajay Dadwal (MD, Corporate Risk India) and Rahul Maroli to victory in the team event. The two-time winner of the Indian Open finished with a two-day aggregate of nine-under 135. And Chinnaswamy Muniyappa, who so memorably won the Hero Honda Indian Open last year, constructed a superb title defense at the Classic. Muniyappa opened with a six-under-par 66 and signed off with a scorching 11-under 61, a round as blistering as the overhead atmospheric conditions, to win by a couple of shots.

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The successful running of this prestigious tournament would not be possible without the support of a select few: Honda SIEL Cars India is the title co-partner of the BT Pro-Am, and Religare and ITC WelcomGroup are the associate sponsors; the event’s prize sponsor is Ethos Summit, while Golf Digest India is the “official magazine”, and Cleveland Golf the “equipment partner”; The Venetian Macao is the “international destination partner”, and Urban 18 the “SIM partner”. Also partnering the BT Pro-Am is Beam Global.