

HIROSHI EXORCISES HIS DEMONS

SPIRITUALISM has rarely played a part in Australian tournament golf, but it was an important element for Japan's Hiroshi Tahara as he made amends for past mistakes to surge to victory in the Australian Senior Open at Spring Valley.

Haunted by last year's final hole in the senior open at Yarra Yarra, Tahara decided on a short pilgrimage before the last day's play.

It was at Yarra last year that he stood on the 72nd tee tied for the lead with Australian Noel Ratcliffe. Unbelievably as the last putt rolled in 20 minutes later, Ratcliffe had won the title by four shots.

The popular 54-year-old Tahara struck trouble in a fairway bunker where he was penalised two shots for testing the condition of a hazard. While Ratcliffe nailed the trophy with a birdie four, the Japanese veteran stumbled to a triple bogey eight. This year for the first three days, as a hot wind turned the greens hard and glassy, Tahara became frustrated and his confidence disappeared. He spent hours on the putting green after each round, but such was his fear of the putter from off the green he switched to his three wood for pitch and run approaches.

Rounds of 73, 76, 78 left him four shots behind leader, 60-year-old



Queenslander Darrell Welch going into the final day.

And so he went alone to Yarra Yarra on Sunday morning, stood at the 18th hole and offered a prayer to the golfing gods, hoping to exorcise last year's experience. He prayed too for rain to soften the greens to transform the course into something like the conditions he was used to in his native Japan.

Heavy rain began in the morning and stayed — so much that the last round was delayed for two hours.

Japan's Hiroshi Tahara. His silent prayer to the golfing gods brought rich rewards at this year's Australian Senior Open at Spring Valley. (Inset) Big-hitting Bob Shaw almost forced a play-off.


The greens held, Tahara's putts ran true and he carved out a final round 69 — only the second round under 70 of the event. Four birdies from the fourth to the 12th holes catapulted him into the lead but he still had one anxious moment awaiting him.

Burly Bob Shaw, the former US Tour pro had birdied the 17th to move within a shot of the Japanese. Shaw sent a booming drive down the 18th and popped a wedge to four metres but his putt which would have forced a play off lipped out of the cup.

"There's was a demon at Yarra Yarra last year," Tahara said. "I couldn't believe what happened."

Tahara finished on 296, 12 over the card and collected \$9000. Welch, who led for two days, struggled to a last round 81 for an aggregate of 303.

The Australian Golf Union was forced to move the Senior Open to November as its original time slot in February-March clashed with the Victorian PGA at Keysborough.

The AGU will negotiate with the PGA to move the tournament closer to the Australian PGA Senior Championship in Canberra in a bid to attract a stronger international field. 

ROBERT GRANT