

SUNDAY FEATURES

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From left to right: Candie Kung, Yani Tseng, Lin Wen-tang, Lu Liang-huan and Lu Wen-teh.

Small strokes, big strides

The tides are changing for Taiwanese golfers, who have been steadily making headlines internationally. Is a revival of the country's former status as Asia's golf kingdom near?

BY ALISON JENNER
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On a sweltering Sunday in June, thousands of spectators in the galleries at Bulle Rock Golf Course in Maryland watched a new star emerge at the McDonald's LPGA Championship.

Pitted against the likes of Annika Sorenstam and Lorena Ochoa, no one expected Yani Tseng (曾雅妮), a 19-year-old rookie from Taiwan, to make much of an impact. But she outperformed the veterans, entered the final round four shots out of the lead and carded a 68 to finish at 12-under 276, tied with Maria Hjorth of Sweden, who posted a 71.

"Yani! Yani! Yani!" the crowd chanted as she entered into the fourth playoff with Hjorth.

"Just make this putt and win a major championship," Tseng said she thought at the time.

Standing over her ball, Tseng gave it a tap and watched as the ball rolled nine inches (175cm) into the hole for a birdie. Cheers erupted. Tseng had just become the first player from Taiwan to win an LPGA (Ladies Professional Golf Association) major. She had also just earned her first victory on the LPGA Tour and was the second-youngest player to win a major.

"I can't believe I just won a major, and I'm a rookie!" said Tseng, who is currently third on the official money list with over US\$1.75 million in earnings. "Everything came so fast."

Five months later, Taiwanese golf was given another affirmative nod at the final hole at the UBS Hong Kong Open, watched by a 17,000-strong crowd.

After Lin Wen-tang (林文堂) narrowly missed a five-foot (1.5m) birdie at the 72nd hole to win the tournament in regulation play, the 34-year-old golfer from Taipei had to contend with a three-way playoff with Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy and Italy's Francesco Molinari, who all carded a 15-under-par 265 after an enthralling final round.

What followed was an amazing two-hole playoff that saw Lin hit an impossible approach shot from behind the trees to within four feet (1.2m) of the pin to snatch a miraculous birdie in the first. Molinari too, saved a tough second shot outside the fairway but two-putted his way out of the playoff.

McIlroy matched Lin's birdie and the duo returned to the 18th tee for another go. This time it was McIlroy's turn to produce an equally incredible approach out of the trees to the back edge of the green. Lin's second shot, however, was perfect, landing a foot

(30cm) from the pin. When McIlroy's birdie putt went wide, the Taiwanese tapped in and gained his first victory on the European Tour. In doing so, he also became the first Asian champion since Kang Wook Soon in 1998 to win that tournament. Incidentally, the winner of the inaugural Hong Kong Open in 1959 was also Taiwanese — Lu Liang-huan (呂良煥).

"Being able to win the 50th edition of the UBS Hong Kong Open is a personal breakthrough for me," said Lin, currently in second place on the Asian Tour Order of Merit with earnings of US\$820,839.

STELLAR LINEUP

Tseng's and Lin's impressive performances are just two examples of how Taiwanese golf is slowly inching towards reclaiming its previous status as "Asia's golf kingdom."

In the last few years, names such as Candie Kung (龔怡萍), who boasts four LPGA victories since turning pro in 2001, and Lu Wen-teh (呂文德), who lifted a record fourth Mercuries Taiwan Masters title in September, have also been brought up more frequently in the golf circuit.

"The Taiwanese players have been quite strong since the 1970s and the 1980s," said Kyi Hla Han, Executive Chairman of Asian Tour, the official regional sanctioning body for professional golf in Asia. "They were among the strongest players in Asia back then."

Indeed, in the 1960s, Taiwanese players such as Chen Ching-shoel (陳清水), Chen Jin-shy (陳金錫) and Hsieh Yung-yu (謝永郁) dominated the Asian circuit.

Other notable figures from Taiwan's golfing history include Hsieh Min-nan (謝敏男), who has won more than 50 titles including both the individual and team trophy at the 1972 World Cup, Kuo Chi-hsiung (郭奇雄) and Chen Tze-ming (陳志明).

But the golfer to propel Taiwan into the international golf arena was Lu Liang-huan. Mr Lu, as he is affectionately called (he earned the moniker for his gentlemanly habit of tipping his pork-pie hat to fans), became world-famous after he lost by one stroke to Lee Trevino at the 1971 British Open, one of golf's four majors. One week later, Lu won the French Open, becoming the first Asian ever to capture a European Tour title. To this date, no other Asian, other than Chen Tze-chung (陳志忠), who came in second at the US Open in 1985, has come close to winning

a PGA major.

Taiwanese women contributed their fair share to the country's glorious golf days, too. In the 1980s, Tu Ai-yu (涂阿玉) was practically a household name. Dubbed the "queen of monetary awards" for being at the top of Japan's money list seven times, Tu has won more than 110 games throughout her career.

Despite these achievements, professional golfers from Taiwan failed to make much of an impression in the world golf scene since the glory days of the 1970s and 1980s.

It wasn't so much that "Taiwanese golf had deteriorated," said Lin. "Taiwan had just been surpassed by others like Japan and Thailand." Industry insiders point to several factors: successful golfers from the 1970s and 1980s who did not do enough (either by coaching or making monetary contributions) to nurture young golfers; a poorly organized training program; and a lack of corporate sponsorship resulting in a weak domestic tour.

Now 72, Lu said: "Taiwan's golf has been lagging because there are not many tournaments here. The players do not have a chance to show off their skills."

The best-known and most important golf tournament on the island is the Mercuries Taiwan Masters, which has been hosted annually since 1987 by Mercuries Corporation. The Taiwan Open, inaugurated in 1965, has been cancelled since 2006 because of a lack of sponsorship.

"It's very important for [Taiwan] to have a domestic tour properly set up so as to attract commercial sponsors," said Kyi of Asian Tour. "After all, it's a commercial world out there, unlike before where sponsors would only come in and donate the prize money. Everything has got to be commercially structured in order to sustain any Tour in today's marketplace. It's important for Taiwan golf to have a proper commercial structure in place so that the exposure for golf in the country can be higher."

The tricky situation with sponsorship is that sponsors are generally unwilling, especially in the current financial situation, to spend money on tournaments that might not reap high returns. Part of the problem here, says Hsu Tien-ya (許典雅), president of the Sunrise Group that owns the Sunrise Golf and Country Club in Taoyuan County, is that local golfers have not proved their marketability.

"The reason why there is a lack of sponsorship is because sponsors do not see the benefits. In the past, they gave money,

our golfers met with success and then things came to a stop," said Hsu. "They did not do their bit to cultivate the next generation of players. As a result, sponsors are not reluctant to do so anymore simply because we did not prove ourselves."

SETTING UP THE APPROACH

For Taiwan to regain the confidence of sponsors, and for the country to have a chance to return to its previous glory, a strict training program is needed to nurture talented golfers from a young age, Hsu said.

In 2002, a junior golf program (青少年培訓班) was created for this purpose. Now into its sixth year, the program is extremely grueling and has been likened to "hell," said Hsu, who is also the Vice President of the Chinese Taipei Golf Association (中華民國台北高爾夫協會) and the chairman of the Junior Committee.

The live-in training program, sponsored by Sunrise Golf and Country Club (揚昇高爾夫鄉村俱樂部), takes in between 12 and 20 amateur golfers annually. Morning call is at 5am and training starts at 5.30am with professional coaches hired from overseas. Parents are allowed two visits a month, for half a day each time. The students are monitored closely and chauffeured to and from school to "minimize any bad influence they might come into."

"The program is so tough that Yani Tseng told reporters that it was like being in hell," Hsu laughed. "But without this hell, there would not be Yani Tseng today."

Without a doubt, the program is bearing fruit. In addition to her surprise win at the US LPGA tournament in June, Tseng, who was in the program from 2002 until last year, captured eight championships alone in 2005.

"Yes, Taiwan's golf used to very good. But I believe our current achievements will help bring us back on track," said Hsu.

How long might it take for Taiwan to reclaim its former status as Asia's golf kingdom?

"Definitely not very long," said Kyi. "Once the local tour is properly structured, the players will have a good foundation, a proper stepping stone, starting from the domestic tour and then moving on to Asian Tour, after which they can go on to play in the US too."

The approach has been lined up for golfers in Taiwan. Now all they have to do is win.

YANI TSENG



Yani Tseng (曾雅妮), a 19-year-old golfer on the LPGA Tour, first started playing golf at the age of 6.

As an amateur, she had a well-decorated career with four victories in the US and 15 international wins.

Tseng spent 2007, her first year as a pro, on the Asian Tour where she won the DLF Women's Indian Open. She also competed on the CN Canadian Women's Tour, where she won the CN Canadian Women's Tour at Vancouver Golf Club. She came in sixth in the final LPGA Qualifying Tournament in December 2007 and earned exempt status for the 2008 LPGA season.

In June, she surprised the world by winning the McDonald's LPGA Championship. In doing so, she became the first player from Taiwan, and the second youngest player, to win a LPGA major. Tseng was named LPGA Rookie of the Year in 2008.

LIN WEN-TANG



Lin Wen-tang (林文堂) is inching closer towards his dream of competing in a US Masters. One of Taiwan's most popular golfers in recent years, Lin scored his maiden victory after nine years on the Asian Tour at the Taiwan Open in 2006. Since then, he has won a title every season.

Lin, who comes from a family of golfers, made his biggest win at the UBS Hong

Kong Open last month where he beat Rory McIlroy and Francesco Molinari in a three-way playoff. His triumph at the Hong Kong Open qualifies him for European Tour status.

Lin is currently competing in this week's season-ending US\$750,000 Volvo Masters of Asia. Ranked 51 in the world, a good finish will allow him to notch one level up and earn a place in the US Masters next year for the first time.

Lin opened his campaign at the Volvo Masters on Thursday with a bogey-free 68 to finish round one tied at second place. In the second round, he battled to a 70 to stay three shots off the pace. As the tournament edges closer to an end, Lin carded a 72 for tied eighth place in the third round yesterday. Barring a disastrous performance today, his current second place on the Asia Tour Order of Merit is pretty much secure. Just three shots off the lead, Lin still has a strong chance of making it into the top 50 in the world ranking.

"The top 50 is in my mind. I am thinking about it but I have to keep to my tempo on the golf course. I'm still feeling good after winning in Hong Kong," he said.

LU LIANG-HUAN



Lu Liang-huan (呂良煥) — or Mr Lu, as he is affectionately known — is credited with putting Taiwanese, and Asian, golf, on the world map.

Like many successful golfers of his time, Lu began in golf as a caddy at the age of 11.

He won his first professional tournament at the inaugural Hong

Kong Open in 1959.

At the British Open in 1971, Lu finished runner-up after losing by just one stroke to Lee Trevino. The following week, Lu won the French Open, becoming the first Asian ever to capture a European Tour title.

CANDIE KUNG



Candie Kung (龔怡萍), a golfer on the LPGA Tour, boasts four LPGA victories since turning pro in 2001.

Taiwan-born Kung, who also has US citizenship, started playing golf at 13. Kung was a three-time American Junior Golf Association (AJGA) All-American and was named 1999 AJGA Player of the Year. She won the 2001 US Women's Amateur Public Links Championship. While at the University of Southern California, Kung was a two-time NCAA All-American and won the 2000 Pac-10 Championship.

In 2007, Kung, who joined the Tour in 2002, passed the US\$3-million career earnings mark.

LU WEN-TEH



Lu Wen-teh (呂文德) lifted his fourth Mercuries Taiwan Masters title in September, in the process setting a record. In his mid-40s, the father of three enjoyed one of his finest seasons on the Asian Tour in 2007 when he won both the Macau Open as well as the Mercuries Taiwan Open. Considered one of Taiwan's

best golfers in the 1990s, the veteran also posted five other top-10s to earn US\$265,909 in 2007, the most in a season in his career. Like Lin, Lu is also competing in this week's season-ending US\$750,000 Volvo Masters of Asia.

— ALISON JENNER