

The maturation of Michelle Wie, major champion

By Doug Ferguson

AP Golf Writer

PINEHURST, North Carolina — Michelle Wie put her table-top putting stance to good use in the late hours after she became a U.S. Women's Open champion.

In a photo she posted to Instagram, Wie is bent over so sharply that her back is parallel to the ground. Only instead of a hitting a putt — like the 25-footer for birdie on the 17th hole at Pinehurst No. 2 that clinched her first major — her head is buried in the Women's Open trophy.

A text message to Meg Mallon would seem to confirm what she was doing.

"She said, 'It takes 21½ beers to fill up the U.S. Open trophy,'" Mallon said.

The maturation of the 24-year-old from Hawaii has been fascinating to watch.

She was a 12-year-old with chubby cheeks and braces who stood behind the 18th green at the Sony Open and talked about her dream of playing the Masters.

Wie played in the final group of a Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) major when she was in the eighth grade. She had a chance to win three majors when she was 16. She shot a 68 on the PGA Tour to miss the cut by one shot at age 14, which inspired her to compete against the men and invited sharp criticism when she couldn't even beat the women.

No one moved the needle like Wie in women's golf.

And perhaps no other female athlete, especially one so young, endured so much condemnation. To her credit — and her parents deserve credit for this, too — she never lashed back at those who questioned the path she chose.

Wie reached the ultimate destination last month, even if she never could have

		69TH U.S. WOMEN'S OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP																			
		HOLE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	RD
		PAR	4	4	4	4	5	3	4	4	3	5	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	1
START	LEADERS																				
2	YANG		1	1	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	3	3	3	3	2	71
2	WIE		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	2	2	68
5	HENDERSON		6	6	5	5	4				6	5	4	4	3	3	3	5	5	7	
2	MEADOW		2	2	2	3	3				4	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	7	
3	YOKOMINE		3	3	3						5	4	3	3	2	3	3	4	4	7	
3	PHATLUM		3	3	2						4	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	7	
2	RYU		2	3	2						4	2	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	6	
6	LEE MEENA		6								5	4	5	4	3	3	3	3	3	7	
3	THOMPSON		3	3							3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	7	
5	LEWIS		5								2	1	1	1	0	1	1	2	1	0	

imagined how she would get there. Stardom included a detour to two stages of Q-school, just so she could become a part-time player while attending — and eventually graduating — from Stanford.

"This is exactly where I wanted to be," Wie said on the eve of the final round at Pinehurst. "When I was 15 and 16, I think the troubles that I came into when I was younger is that I tried to plan my life, and a lot of times things don't happen the way they should — or the way they should in my mind."

She had a road map at 15?

"Oh, yeah," she replied, smiling at a room full of reporters. "Don't you all?"

It would be easy to suggest that Wie arrived as the player everyone thought she could be when the final putt fell for a two-shot victory, just moment before the church bells began ringing at Pinehurst.

She arrived much earlier. She won in Hawaii earlier this year. She was in the last group at a major. She was a contender just about every week.

"This was just the exclamation point," Mallon said.

Mallon won her fourth major 10 years ago at the U.S. Women's Open, the same year she first got to know a tall teen from Hawaii who could hit the ball a mile. She saw a prodigy. She also saw a girl.

"I adore the kid," Mallon said. "We were paired in a pro-am when she was 14 and we had a blast. We were challenging each other with short-game shots and we made a bet. She said, 'If I win, I get to put streaks in my hair.' I went over to Bo (Wie's mother) and asked if that was OK. She won and put streaks in her hair that afternoon."

Wie's game was questioned last August when she was a captain's pick for the Solheim Cup — by Mallon — over a player who had won that year and was ahead of Wie in the standings. Mallon called it a "no-brainer" because she needed someone who could handle the big stage. Few knew it better.

"I was looking at picks about three

FIRST MAJOR. Michelle Wie poses with the U.S. Women's Open trophy after winning the golf tournament in Pinehurst, North Carolina. Wie, now 24 years old and a Stanford graduate, has been one of the biggest stars in women's golf since she was 13 years old. (AP Photo/Bob Leverone)

weeks out and Michelle came up and said, 'Gosh, Meg, I know I'm six months away from where I want to be. I am so close.' And you kind of look now at where she is," Mallon said.

Wie is leading the LPGA Tour money list, approaching \$1.6 million. She had never earned over \$1 million in a season. She is No. 7 in the women's world ranking.

And she figured this out all on her own.

She always had the swing and the power to win a major. Her putting for years was the weakest part of her game. And yet she won the Open by going an entire week without a three-putt, by making a tricky five-foot putt to salvage double bogey on the 16th hole and keep the lead, and by making one of the hardest putts at Pinehurst at the 17th. It was fast and broke in two directions, and this one slammed into the back of the cup nearly as hard as she slammed her fist when it fell.

Wie created this unique "table-top" style all by herself. She followed Mallon's advice in the offseason by putting away the video and bringing more feel into her game.

There was no better feeling than holding the trophy — or drinking out of it.

She no longer tries to map out her life as much as she once did, though Wie allowed herself such a moment a week before her win, when she walked up the 18th fairway with Martin Kaymer when he won the men's U.S. Open.

"I thought to myself, 'I want to be here on Sunday. I want to feel this exact thing,'" she said. "It's a dream come true that it actually happened."

Sixth-grader Lucy Li's Open: a 78, then ice cream

By Doug Ferguson

The Associated Press

PINEHURST, N.C. — Lucy Li showed her age only when she finished her historic round at the U.S. Women's Open.

Just like any 11-year-old, she went straight for an ice cream.

The youngest qualifier ever at the Women's Open played a grown-up game at Pinehurst No. 2, except for three holes that made her 8-over 78 look a lot worse than it was.

"She looks 11. She doesn't talk 11. And she doesn't hit the ball like she's 11," said Catherine O'Donnell, who played with her in a sunbaked opening round on a course that only four days earlier hosted the men's U.S. Open.

The sixth-grader from the Bay Area was the star attraction, right down to her Stars & Stripes outfit to celebrate the occasion. She wore a mid-drift shirt patterned after the American flag, with a similar motif for a skirt, complete with silver stars that matched the color of her braces.

Li wound up 11 shots behind Stacy Lewis, the No. 1 player in the world, who opened with a 67. But one moment was telling.

The kid made a seven-foot birdie putt on the par-5 fifth hole and headed to the next tee, her braided pigtails swinging with each step. The media and a large gallery followed her right past the adjacent green, where hardly anyone noticed Lewis making her way around Pinehurst with no bogeys.

Only this was more than just a sideshow.

Li missed only one fairway — by less than a yard. Even though she hit fairway metals into half of the holes, she rarely got out of position. Now if she could only take back three shots that led to big numbers.

"It was a lot of fun. I kind of struggled



today, but it was great," Li said, pausing to lick her ice cream between answers. "I mean, it's 8 over. It's not bad. But I was 7 over in three holes, so that's 1 over in 15 holes. So yeah, I just need to get rid of the big numbers."

Li had the same score as O'Donnell, Natalie Gulbis, and Jessica Korda, a two-time winner on the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) Tour this year.

Perhaps most remarkable about her round, besides the 13 pars and two birdies, was how she bounced back from mistakes.

"That's what I was so happy about in my round," she said. "Because after I got doubles and triples, I was able to get it back. Like I made a good stretch of holes after the double on the first hole. And after the triple, I birdied No. 5. And I got a lot of pars after that."

Li left a tough angle for her third shot on the par-5 10th hole and came up short and into a bunker. The sand shot looked

reasonable until it kept rolling off the back of the green. She chipped with her wedge (a pink shaft) to about eight feet and missed the putt to take double bogey.

Another double bogey came on the 450-yard 16th hole when her fairway metal went into a bunker some 20 yards short of an elevated green, leaving a shot so hard even the best men would have a tough time. Her bunker shot was not strong enough, and she wound up missing a seven-foot bogey putt.

Asked to have one swing back, it would be the wedge on the short third hole. She went left of the flag, and it trickled off the turtleback green — the signature of the Donald Ross course — and into a bunker. She blasted out over the green, chipped on to 18 feet, and three-putted for triple bogey.

But she made a pair of smooth birdies — a 6-iron to 15 feet on No. 1, and a wedge to a right pin position on the fifth hole — along

LI HITS THE LINKS. Lucy Li putts on the 11th hole during the first round of the U.S. Women's Open golf tournament in Pinehurst, North Carolina. The sixth-grader from the Bay Area, the youngest qualifier ever at the Women's Open, celebrated the achievement with a Stars & Stripes outfit. (AP Photo/Chuck Burton)

with some tough par saves. The best came at the 426-yard eighth hole, when her 5-wood from 198 yards went long and over a steep slope right of the green. She lofted a pitch perfectly, and it rolled six feet by the cup. This is the same hole where John Daly putted off the green so many times in 1999 that he whacked the ball with his putter when it was still moving and rang up an 11.

"Give her that shot again and she can't do that another 50 times, probably," O'Donnell said.

Along the way in a 5½-hour round, Li often plopped to the ground in the shade and sat until it was time to hit, one time munching from a cup of fruit.

"I normally sit down even more than that," she said, giggling as always.

Kaymer a week earlier had used a putter exclusively when he was just off the green. Li chose to chip because that's what made her more comfortable. She won the driving and chipping portion of the Drive, Chip & Putt Championship two months ago at Augusta National.

That was for kids. This is for grownups. She fit in just fine.

"She's so much more mature than I could possibly imagine," said Jessica Wallace, the other player in their group. "She's a lot better than people thought. She's very capable on this golf course. She played like she belongs out here. And it was a real pleasure."

The youngest player to make the cut was 13-year-old Marlene Bauer, who tied for 14th in 1947. That was the second U.S.

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