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# South Koreans dominate LPGA top ranks

By Mike Street  
Special to The Asian Reporter

Asian golfers continue to dominate the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), but South Korea easily leads every country, Asian or not, in top-ranked golfers. Entering the final week of June, no other country had more players in the top 10, 100, or 500 of the LPGA's Rolex Rankings than South Korea. Several up-and-coming golfers hail from South Korea, too.

Some players are both in the top 10 and among the best young players on the tour. Sei Young Kim, currently ranked tenth in the Rolex Rankings, and Hyo Joo Kim, ranked fourth, are also tour rookies. Hyo Joo made her debut on the tour last year, competing as a nonmember, and arrived with a bang.

Playing in the 2014 Evian Championship, she shot a 61 on the first day, the best one-round score in the history of LPGA major championships. Unsurprisingly, she went on to win the Evian for her first major victory. This season, Hyo Joo has already won the JTBC Founders Cup and leads the tour in rounds shot in the 60s, yet she sits in second place on the Rolex Rookie Rankings.

Sitting ahead of Hyo Joo Kim is her countrywoman Sei Young Kim, who leads the LPGA in birdies and eagles. Sei Young won the Pure Silk-Bahamas LPGA Classic in February and the LOTTE Championship in April. In June, she placed second in the KPMG Women's PGA Championship. During the LOTTE Championship victory, she won in dramatic fashion, forcing a playoff by chipping in on the 18th hole, then seizing the victory on the first playoff hole by sinking a 154-yard shot from the fairway with an 8 iron.

The woman Sei Young Kim beat with that series of incredible shots was Inbee Park, who has been on the LPGA tour since 2007. Park also made her mark at an early age; in just her second year on the tour, she became the youngest player to win the U.S. Open, a few weeks shy of her 20th birthday.

In 2013, after becoming the first player in the modern era to win the first three majors of the season, Park became the first South Korean selected as Rolex Player of the Year. She is currently leading the field for the award this year after winning three events, including the KPMG Women's PGA Championship.

The fourth South Korean in the top ten, So Yeon Ryu, has been a winner for some time now. As a 16-year-old amateur, she won team and individual gold medals in



**LPGA LEADERS.** Sei Young Kim of South Korea hits a tee shot on the 17th hole (left photo) and Hyo Joo Kim tees off on the first hole (right photo) during the KPMG Women's Professional Golf Association championship last month at Westchester Country Club in Harrison, New York. (AP Photos/Julio Cortez)



the 2006 Asian Games. Two years later, she joined the Korean LPGA, where she won six tournaments before winning the 2011 U.S. Women's Open and earning her 2012 tour card.

In her first year on the tour, Ryu earned Rookie of the Year honors after winning the Jamie Farr Toledo Classic and placing in the top five in eight different statistical categories. A third LPGA victory has eluded Ryu in the years since, but she remains a dominant player, consistently placing in the top ten in birdies, scoring average, and rounds under par.

If one counts heritage, not just country representation, another top-10 South Korean can be added to the list. Lydia Ko was born in Seoul and moved at about age six to New Zealand, where she is now a citizen. Ko is already drawing raves for her amazing play, with some calling her the best young golfer in history, male or female.

Earlier this year, a few months before turning 18 years old, Ko became the youngest golfer in history of either gender to earn the world's number-one ranking. The LPGA had already granted her a special waiver to allow her to play on the tour in 2014, since its minimum age is 18. That season, she won three tournaments, placed second in two others, and finished in the top ten in ten more. Few were surprised when Ko became the youngest player ever to win LPGA Rookie of the Year.

So far this year, Ko has won twice, been runner-up twice, and placed third once. In seven of her first eight tournaments, she finished in the top ten, showing why she is such a formidable young force. Ko is currently in second place in the Rolex rankings, nipping at the heels of Inbee Park.

Aside from these South Koreans, Shanshan Feng of China is currently ranked sixth in the LPGA, and several other Asian golfers are among the league's

promising young rookies. Nineteen-year-old Minjee Lee, an Australian golfer born of Korean parents, notched her first LPGA win in May at the Kingsmill Championship, and Thailand's Ariya Jutanugarnis, an excellent driver, returned from shoulder surgery this season. In addition, former KLPGA Player of the Year Ha Na Jang is currently fourth on the Rolex Rookie Rankings. The present and the future of the LPGA is truly in the east.

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