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Ko and Park face off in nail-biting season finale

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

The final tournament of any season can be jam-packed with excitement, and this season's Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) finale featured a race down to the wire. In the 2015 CME Group Tour Championship, Cristie Kerr shot four strokes under par in the final round to eke out a one-stroke victory over South Korea's Ha Na Jang. But that wasn't the real nail-biter. That occurred between Lydia Ko and Inbee Park, two golfers of South Korean heritage who were battling not only for a bushel of season awards, but for personal milestones.

Heading into the CME Group Tour Championship, Ko and Park stood at numbers one and two in the Rolex World Rankings, the money rankings, the Vare Trophy for scoring average, Rolex Player of the Year, and the Race to the CME Globe. The margin between them was so tight that just a stroke or two could make the difference in who finished first.

Both women have had fantastic seasons. Park, in her ninth year on the tour, was continuing her run of excellence. Of Park's 17 tour victories, 14 came in the past three seasons, including six of her seven major wins. She ended both the 2013 and 2014 seasons ranked first in the world and won the Vare Trophy in 2012.

This season, Park played in 25 events, finishing in the top 10 in 15 of them — including three of the four events leading up to the CME Group Tour Championship — and winning five. Even more importantly, Park's performance at the Lorena Ochoa Invitational brought her



AP Photo/Lee Jin-man

within one point of qualifying for the LPGA Hall of Fame.

Winning the CME Group Tour Championship, the Rolex Player of the Year award, or the Vare Trophy would give her that final point. Merely placing well at the CME would still make Park the highest earning South Korea-born golfer; she stood about \$43,000 behind Se Ri Pak for that honor before the tournament began.

If anyone could challenge Park's current LPGA dominance, it would be South Korea-born New Zealand citizen Lydia Ko.



AP Photo/Christian Palma

At just 18 years old, Ko is already ascending to the top of the LPGA while setting records for dominance at such a young age. Ko joined the tour in 2014, but already has 10 wins — a mark that took Park seven seasons to reach. In fact, no one in the history of golf has reached 10 wins faster than Ko.

Last season, Ko made the cut in all 26 events she entered, winning three and finishing in the top 10 in 12 others. She played so well that she won the first-ever Race to the CME Globe title and the Louise Suggs Rolex Rookie of the Year award, becoming the youngest ever to win either one. The \$1 million bonus she won from the Race to the Globe helped her also become the youngest player to amass \$1 million as well as \$2 million in career earnings.

This season, Ko made the cut in 23 of the 24 events she entered, skipping the two tournaments just before the CME Group Tour Championship to stay as fresh as possible. Like Park, she'd won five events this year and was playing exceptionally well: Ko won three of her previous seven tournaments and placed in the top ten in the other four, including a second- and a fourth-place finish. In addition, Ko won the CME Group Tour Championship in 2014, coming from three strokes back to seize both the tournament and the Race to the Globe; the huge payout for her double win was the biggest in women's golf history.

The stage was set for a showdown between two of the best young golfers on

CLOSE COMPETITION. The final tournament of any season can be jam-packed with excitement, and this season's Ladies Professional Golf Association finale featured a race down to the wire. Two players in contention included Lydia Ko (left photo) and Inbee Park (right photo), two golfers of South Korean heritage who battled not only for a bushel of season awards, but for personal milestones.

the tour. Austin Ernst led after the first day, four shots ahead of Ko and six ahead of Park. South Korea's Jang, whose eventual second-place finish would seal the 2015 Rolex Rookie of the Year award for her, took the lead on Friday with a four-under 65. But Ko also improved on her first-day 69, shooting a 67 to finish two strokes behind Jang and four ahead of Park.

Inbee Park sliced that lead in half on Saturday, but Ko still held the advantage. If the tournament had ended that day, Ko would have swept the trophies from Park — but that's why they play on Sunday. As Ko said after her round on Saturday, "There's still a lot of golf to be played ... Anything can happen."

Anything nearly happened. Park birdied two holes on the front nine and two more on the back, but a bogey on the 12th hole gave her a 69 on the day, three under par. Ko shot two birdies, but two bogies dropped her to even on the day. This left her one stroke behind Park in the tournament — and less than three hundredths of a point behind Park in the Vare Trophy race. But her overall finish still helped Ko squeak past Park in every other category: Rolex Player of the Year, season earnings, Race to the CME Globe, and the Rolex Women's World Golf Rankings.

Despite the disappointment of losing to Ko, winning the Vare Trophy still gave Inbee Park that final point to qualify for the LPGA Hall of Fame. She became the youngest player in history to do so, capping off a year in which she won the KPMG Women's PGA Championship for the third straight year and completed the career Grand Slam by winning the RICOH Women's British Open.

The 27-year-old Park quipped after, "I thought the youngest everything was Lydia. I'm doing something youngest ... It feels great to hear that I'm still young."

With these two incredible young golfers reaching their prime at the same time and new players like Jang joining the tour, Asian sports fans can look forward to nail-biting excitement like this for years to come.

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