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Young Asian golfers take turns atop LPGA

By Mike Street
Special to The Asian Reporter

No major American sport has seen more rising Asian talent than the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), and this year is shaping up to be one of the most exciting Asian-dominated seasons ever. Already, three different golfers of Asian heritage have captured the top spot in the LPGA's Rolex Rankings and eight of the top-ten golfers are also of Asian descent.

This season began with Lydia Ko at number one in the Rolex Rankings, after just missing winning the top spot for the second-straight year in 2016. That near-miss inspired the Korea-born New Zealander to change her clubs, caddie, and instructor at the start of this season, and Ko promptly finished in the top ten in three of the first four tournaments.

Then she missed the cut at the Kia Classic in March and fired her new caddie in April, shortly before an eye infection forced her to withdraw from the Texas Shootout. Top-ten finishes in her next three events suggested Ko was back on track, but she hadn't won any of the season's first 11 events, and that's not the way to hold onto the number-one spot in the LPGA.

Breathing down Ko's neck has been 21-year-old Ariya Jutanugarn, the Thai golfer who edged her out for the top spot in 2016. Jutanugarn not only won the 2016 Rolex Rankings, she also won the money title and the Race to the CME Globe — all in just her second season on the tour. Only one other player has taken all of those three awards in the same year: Lydia Ko in 2015, also in her second LPGA season.

Jutanugarn built on her 2016 finish with a strong start to 2017. In her first 11 tournaments, she finished in the top ten of eight of them, three of those in the top three. Heading into the Manulife LPGA Classic in June, Jutanugarn stood just a hundredth of a point behind Ko, so close that an LPGA miscalculation had mistakenly put her in first before the error was discovered.

But instead of a dramatic showdown at the Manulife, Ko chose not to play, and Jutanugarn won the tournament in a playoff, placing her correctly atop the Rolex rankings. It was the first time a Thai golfer —



SUPERIOR STROKES. South Korea's So Yeon Ryu (top photo) hits out of a sand trap on the fourth hole during the final round of the U.S. Women's Open Golf tournament in Bedminster, New Jersey. In the bottom photo, Ariya Jutanugarn of Thailand hits off the 14th fairway during the first round of the same tournament. (AP Photos/Seth Wenig)

male or female — had reached number one in the world.

Jutanugarn's reign would not last long, however. The following week, she tied for 22nd place in the Meijer LPGA Classic — a respectable finish, but not good enough to stay in first place after South Korea's So Yeon Ryu won the Walmart NW Arkansas Championship.

Now Ryu stands at the top of the Rolex Rankings, a move that has surprised few LPGA fans. Another excellent young golfer, Ryu won the 2011 LPGA U.S. Women's Open before even joining the tour, and then she took the Rolex rookie award the following season.

Though Ryu had only won three other LPGA events before this season, she consistently finishes in the top ten of tournaments thanks to her very precise game. In 2016, she ranked second on the tour in greens in regulation, sixth in scoring

average, and 10th in rounds under par. She began this season with an active streak of making the cut in 55 consecutive tournaments.

Ryu has continued her consistency. Though she broke the streak at 64 straight tournaments in June by missing the cut at the ShopRite LPGA Classic, Ryu has still notched five top-five finishes this season (including a victory at the ANA Inspiration in March) and four more finishes in the top ten.

Since ascending to the top spot, Ryu has played well while Ko and Jutanugarn have struggled. Ryu tied for 14th at the KPMG Women's PGA Championship and tied for third at the U.S. Women's Open. Ko, meanwhile, tied for 59th at the PGA Championship and tied for 33rd at the Open, starting strong in both events before faltering over the final rounds.

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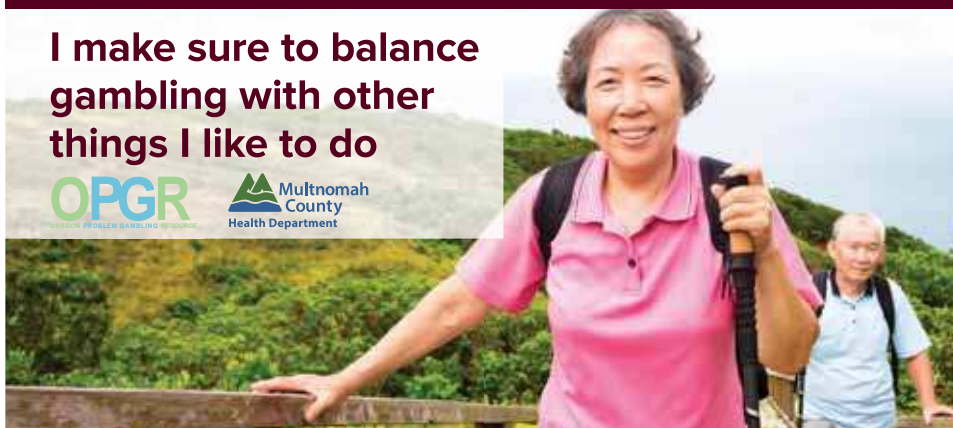
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