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Hideki Matsuyama quietly rises up the ranks of the PGA

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

If you'd asked me last year which Asian or Asian-American golfer would have a good 2017, I might have said Jason Day, the Filipino-Australian golfer who has finished in the top 10 of the FedEx Cup rankings each of the last four years. Or maybe a young standout like New Zealand's Danny Lee, Korean American Kevin Na, or Japan's "Bashful Prince" Ryo Ishikawa — all of whom have shown flashes of greatness or consistency the last several years.

All of those are excellent golfers, but I would have overlooked Japan's Hideki Matsuyama, who has steadily risen in the FedEx Cup rankings each of the past three years. Matsuyama now stands near the top of those rankings, thanks to a season in which he has more than doubled his career win output.

You might remember Matsuyama's dramatic Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) debut in the 2011 Masters, mere weeks after his hometown of Sendai was devastated by a 9.0 earthquake and subsequent tsunami. The 19-year-old Matsuyama had qualified for the Masters after winning Japan's Asian Amateur Championship.

Despite the fact he wasn't even sure his entire family was safe, Matsuyama decided to play in the Masters, wearing a patch of the Japanese flag on his shirt that he dedicated to the quake victims. He took the tournament's silver cup for the best performance by an amateur after finishing in a tie for 27th place.

In 2013, his first year as a professional, Matsuyama qualified for the PGA Tour and made the cut in all but the Sony Open, finishing in the top 25 in the six other PGA



tournaments he entered. His best finish was a tie for sixth at The Open Championship, followed by a 10th-place finish at the U.S. Open.

The following season, Matsuyama won his first PGA tournament, shooting a 13-under to win the Memorial Tournament presented by Nationwide Insurance in June. But he notched only three other top-ten finishes in 2014, withdrawing or missing the cut in five other events.

2015 saw more consistency from Matsuyama as he missed the cut in just two events, finishing in the top five of six events and the top ten of three more. He ended the season in 16th place in the FedEx Cup rankings, his first year in the top 20.

Last season, Matsuyama finally collected that elusive second victory,

winning the Waste Management Phoenix Open, where he had tied for second and fourth the preceding two years. He also tied for third at the Wyndham Championship, his fourth time playing that course.

But Matsuyama did not merely perform well at familiar courses. He tied for fourth at the PGA Championship, the first PGA event at Baltusrol Golf Course since 2005. It was also his first tournament at East Lake Golf Course, at which he took fifth at the Tour Championship. He finished in the top ten in four other tournaments and in the top 25 at 10 others.

Matsuyama finished in 13th place in the FedEx Cup standings at the end of the season, setting him up for a breakthrough 2017, a season that began less than a month after the Tour Championship that

GREAT GOLF. Hideki Matsuyama of Japan watches his tee shot on the sixth hole during the third round of the Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) Championship tournament at the Quail Hollow Club in Charlotte, North Carolina. Matsuyama started his professional career in 2013, a year in which he finished in the top 25 in six PGA tournaments. (AP Photo/Chris O'Meara)

concluded 2016.

He started the season with a burst of great golf. He placed second in the CIMB Classic to kick off the 2017 season, won the first leg of the World Golf Championships at the HSBC Champions, and placed second at the SBS Tournament of Champions.

His combined score at all three events equalled a whopping 62 strokes under par, and his win at the World Golf Championship put him in first place in the FedEx Cup rankings for the first time in his career. It's easier to get atop the rankings early than it is to sustain that spot throughout the season, and Matsuyama slipped out of first after two weak showings at January tour events.

In February, Matsuyama again won the Waste Management Phoenix Open, returning him to first place in the FedEx Cup. Several months of weak play dropped him back as far as third place, but then he vaulted back into the top spot after tying for second at the U.S. Open and winning the Bridgestone Invitational leg of the World Golf Championships.

With the Tour Championship at the end of September, it's sure to be a tight race between Matsuyama, Justin Thomas, and Jordan Spieth. And even if first place is just beyond Matsuyama's grasp, this season and the steady growth leading up to it has shown the 25-year-old will be a contender for many years to come. He's unlikely to be overlooked again.

Exchange: Illinois couple opens home to travelling cyclists

By Lenore Sobota

The Pantagraph

NORMAL, Ill. (AP) — As Ha Joo-Young ate a breakfast of thin Dutch pancakes with choices of fillings from bacon to strawberries on a Saturday morning, the 23-year-old South Korean said, "We are lucky today."

Ha and his travelling companion, Jo Yong-Ju, 19, had spent the night at the home of Willy Hunter and Rebecca Houtsma in Normal, Illinois, making the connection through a website for cyclists called "Warm Showers."

The website describes the "Warm Showers Community" as "a free, worldwide hospitality exchange for touring cyclists."

All hosts are expected to do is provide a

place to stay, whether it's a room with a bed, a couch, or a place to camp.

But Hunter and Houtsma take being hosts a step further.

They provided both dinner and breakfast for the two college students who are riding across the country to raise awareness about "comfort women" who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military before and during World War II.

"For me, the meals are very important. It's my way of being part of the adventure," Houtsma said. "For the 12 hours or so that we have them, they are our family."

Before the cyclists left, she and her husband also gave them sandwiches, energy bars, Gatorade, and homemade banana-chocolate chip muffins.

"I want to fill them with as many calories as I can," she said.

Hunter said becoming part of Warm Showers was an idea that had been "percolating for the last few years."

After becoming empty-nesters with their youngest child in college and space available, they decided the time was right, he said.

Ha and Jo were the third and fourth cyclists they hosted. The others were another Korean cyclist and a 70-year-old man who rode from Seattle "doing a bucket list kind of thing," said Hunter.

"I like people who are on adventures," he said.

Michael Gorman of Bloomington has been a Warm Showers host for nearly two years.

The co-founder of the cycling advocacy group Bike BloNo first learned about it from a musician who was travelling by bicycle and Bike BloNo had invited to town in September 2015.

"I signed up that night or the next morning," Gorman said.

Since then, he has hosted about 20 people.

"It's a really interesting, unique way to meet people," he said.

Jo and Ha have been finding places to stay through Warm Showers wherever possible along their route.

The concept seemed surprising to them at first, with Ha saying people in his country usually are not as welcoming to strangers.

"The kind of reception we have had in the United States is cheering us up very much," said Jo. "It makes us more brave and comfortable and confident."

The trip is the first time the young men have been to the United States.

"We've gone through 10 states and the



WARM SHOWERS. Rebecca Houtsma, center, bids farewell to cyclists Ha Joo-Young, left, and Jo Yong-Ju of South Korea, in Normal, Illinois. The two cyclists overnights at Houtsma's home on their journey across the United States. (Lenore Sobota/The Pantagraph via AP)

scenery keeps changing," said Jo. "It's very impressive and beautiful."

Warm Showers isn't the only part of the "sharing economy" in which Hunter and Houtsma participate. They also are part of an international program in which people swap use of their recreational vehicles.

"Not many people from abroad want to swap in the Midwest," said Hunter, but a couple from Wales planned to use their RV to see the total solar eclipse in southern Illinois and travel the Great Lakes area. Hunter and Houtsma used the couple's Volkswagen camper while visiting Wales.

A person from France also has reserved their RV.

"The camper now has its own calendar," Hunter said.

Gorman said he has used Airbnb, an online lodging program that includes private residences, but he "didn't really have a connection."

With Warm Showers, participants are

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