

Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

Eastern talent on display at 2018 Masters

By Mike Street
Special to The Asian Reporter

Trying to draw in an international audience, the Masters Tournament at Augusta National has sometimes issued special invitations to popular international golfers who hadn't otherwise qualified. But as eastern talent levels have increased, many Asian golfers have qualified on their own merit, requiring fewer special invitations. This year saw several Asian golfers qualify and perform well at the Masters, along with one Asian-American golfer who cracked the top ten.

A handful of prominent Asian-American golfers have performed well at the Masters: Tiger Woods has won four times, and Kevin Na barely missed the top ten in both 2012 and 2013. This year, however, Tony Finau did what Na and other Asian and Pacific Islander (API) golfers couldn't, finishing in 10th place.

In 2015, Finau qualified for the Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) Tour, becoming the first person of Tongan or Samoan heritage to do so. After watching Tiger Woods win his first Masters in 1997, Tony took up the game at age seven, following in the footsteps of his younger brother Gipper, who was already playing well.

Both boys soon made their mark, winning tournaments and leading their high school to its first golf championship in the school's 114-year history. Tony turned pro in 2007, a year after winning the Utah State Amateur tournament at age 16. The same year Tony went pro, Gipper became the third-youngest player to make the cut at a PGA event when he played in the PGA Nationwide in Utah. Gipper continues to play on the developmental Web.com tour, hoping one day to follow his older brother onto the PGA Tour.

Since qualifying, Tony has steadily improved on the tour. He notched five top-ten finishes in his first season, then won his first career PGA Tour event in 2016. Last season, he had eight top-ten finishes, including five in the top five. Heading into the Masters this season, Tony had two second-place finishes, another top-ten finish, and five more in the top 25.

In April, Finau made the most of his Masters debut, especially on the first and last rounds. In the round on Thursday, he recovered from a bogey on the first hole to shoot six birdies and card a 68. Then he shot a 74 on Friday and bogeyed four straight holes on Saturday, finishing with a 73.

After posting two weak scores, few people were looking at Finau on Sunday, but he finished strong nonetheless. Sitting at par after 11 holes, he birdied six straight holes for a 66, finishing in a tie for 10th, eight shots ahead of his idol, Tiger Woods.



AP Photo/David J. Phillip



AP Photo/Chris Carlson

MASTERFUL STROKES. A handful of prominent Asian-American golfers have performed well at the Masters: Tiger Woods has won four times, and Kevin Na barely missed the top ten in both 2012 and 2013. This year, however, Tony Finau (left photo) did what Na and other Asian and Pacific Islander golfers couldn't, finishing in 10th place. Behind Finau, a host of Asian golfers put together a great tournament at this year's Masters. Top among those is 26-year-old Japanese player Hideki Matsuyama (right photo).

Behind Finau, a host of Asian golfers put together a great Masters tournament. Top among those is Hideki Matsuyama, the 26-year-old Japanese player who has improved his official World Golf Ranking every year since 2008.

As I wrote in September, 2017 was Matsuyama's best season on the PGA Tour. He won five tournaments and had his best result in a PGA major tournament, tying for second at the 2017 U.S. Open, one of three second-place finishes on the season.

Matsuyama had also performed well at previous Masters, tying for seventh in 2016 and tying for 11th in 2017. This year, he was hobbled by a slow start, carding a one-over 73 on Thursday. He never got into a groove in the next two rounds, shooting one-under on Friday and even on Saturday. But he recovered on Sunday to shoot a 69 that enabled him to finish in 19th place.

One stroke behind Matsuyama in the final Masters standing was Filipino-Australian Jason Day, one of the most consistent golfers in the last five years and a perennial contender. And one stroke behind Day was 22-year-old Si Woo Kim, the South Korean who earned his PGA Tour card at age 17. After spending several years on the Web.com developmental tour alongside Finau, Kim won one PGA tournament in each of the past two seasons and has already finished second and third in two 2018

tournaments.

One week after the Masters, Kim might have won his third PGA tournament at the RBC Heritage, but he fell in the third playoff hole to 28-year-old Satoshi Kodaira, a Japanese golfer who finished a stroke behind Kim at the 2018 Masters. Kodaira earned his first Masters invitation after placing in the top 50 in the official World Golf Rankings. Like Kim, Kodaira will be one to watch.

Two other rising Asian golfers made their Masters debut in 2018: China's Haotong Li and India's Shubhankar Sharma. Li dazzled the crowd by carding a 69 on Thursday, but he fizzled down the stretch, shooting a 76 on Friday and two straight 72s over the weekend to finish in a tie for 32nd.

Nicknamed "Big Sharma," Sharma is the top-ranked golfer in India, and he won twice on the European Tour this season. Sharma is also from the same town as Jeev Milkha Singh, who became the first Indian golfer to play in the Masters in 2008. Singh tied for 25th place that year, but Big Sharma couldn't follow in his footsteps in 2018, missing the cut after shooting a 77 on the first day and 74 on the second.

The Masters tournament has become a glimpse of the increasingly eastern reach of professional golf. Though the PGA has not become dominated by South Korean golfers in the way the Ladies Professional Golf Association has, this year's Masters offered plenty of evidence for rising talent from across the eastern hemisphere.

Ichiro Suzuki released by Mariners, moving to front office

By Tim Booth
AP Sports Writer

SEATTLE — Ichiro Suzuki has been released by the Seattle Mariners and is shifting into a front office role with the team, although he is not completely shutting the door on playing again.

The Mariners announced that Suzuki was becoming a special assistant to the chairman effective immediately. The team said Suzuki will have an active presence with the team and assist with outfield play, base running, and hitting.

But nowhere in the announcement do they say the 44-year-old is retiring, although Suzuki is precluded from returning to the active roster in 2018.

"We want to make sure we capture all of the value that Ichiro brings to this team off the field," Seattle general manager Jerry Dipoto said in a release. "This new role is a way to accomplish that. While it will evolve over time, the key is that Ichiro's presence in our clubhouse and with our players and staff improves our opportunity to win games. That is our number-one priority and Ichiro's number-one priority."

Suzuki is in his 18th season and had appeared in 15 games this year for the Mariners. Suzuki started recently against the Oakland A's and went 0-for-3 with a walk and a run scored. He hit .205 in 44 at-bats and all nine of his hits this season were singles.

"Now I don't feel as bad about walking Ichiro last night," tweeted Oakland A's lefty Brett Anderson, who started the game and walked Suzuki in the third inning.

Suzuki has spent parts of 13 seasons with the Mariners. He's also played for Miami and the New York Yankees.

"With Ichiro's track record of success, his personality, his unique perspective, and his work ethic, he is singularly positioned to impact both our younger players

and the veterans in the clubhouse," Dipoto said. "We really don't want him to change anything that he's doing right now, with the exception that he will not be playing in games. We believe that Ichiro's signing and his assimilation into our team has helped us this season and we want to make sure we continue that."

While Suzuki can't return to Seattle's roster this season, anything beyond 2018 is unknown. While there are no guarantees of Suzuki returning, Seattle and Oakland do open the 2019 regular season with a two-game series in Tokyo.

"While this agreement only covers the 2018 season, it is our goal that Ichiro be a member of the Seattle organization long term," Dipoto said. "As his role evolves over the 2018 season, it will inform the team and Ichiro on his best fit with us in 2019 and beyond."

After almost six years away, Suzuki returned this spring to help patch an injury-depleted outfield on the team he played for from 2001 to 2012. Suzuki was signed after Seattle learned Ben Gamel would miss the first few weeks of the regular season and the reunion was a feel-good story of the former star returning to where his career in the majors got started.

While Suzuki struggled at the plate, he did have a few defensive gems, including robbing Cleveland's Jose Ramirez of a homer on the opening weekend of the season and reminding everyone of his greatness as an all-around player. Suzuki earned the 2001 AL Rookie of the Year and MVP awards with the Mariners and won a pair of AL batting titles. He was traded to the Yankees midway through 2012, played parts of three seasons with New York, then spent three seasons with Miami.

The 10-time All-Star has a .311 average and 3,089 hits, not including the 1,278 hits he amassed in nine seasons in Japan.

su | do | ku

© Puzzles by Pappocom

	9		4	2			
1	3		7				5
		2		6			
					6		8
7	3				1		9
2	9						
			4		8		
4				9		3	2
			5	2		9	

Difficulty level: Hard

#94213

Instructions: Fill in the grid so that the digits 1 through 9 appear one time each in every row, column, and 3x3 box.

Solution to last issue's puzzle

Puzzle #93287 (Medium)

All solutions available at <www.sudoku.com>.

9	6	3	2	5	1	4	7	8
1	5	4	3	7	8	6	2	9
7	2	8	4	9	6	5	1	3
3	9	2	7	6	4	8	5	1
6	4	7	1	8	5	9	3	2
5	8	1	9	3	2	7	4	6
8	1	5	6	4	3	2	9	7
2	7	6	5	1	9	3	8	4
4	3	9	8	2	7	1	6	5