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Two top Thai LPGA stars are also sisters

By Mike Street
Special to The Asian Reporter

The Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) has been dominated by eastern golfers lately, nearly all of them from South Korea. Then in 2016, Ariya Jutanugarn burst onto the scene, becoming the first Thai golfer of either gender to reach the top of the world golf rankings. After struggling last season, Ariya now leads the 2018 Race to the CME Globe, ahead of another Thai golfer: her sister Moriya.

Moriya has actually been on the LPGA tour longer than her younger sister Ariya, having qualified for the tour as soon as she was eligible in 2013. In her first season, Moriya played in 24 events, registering a fourth-place finish and five other top-20 finishes, earning the 2013 Rookie of the Year award.

In the next several seasons, she struggled to match that success. Unable to finish higher than fourth in a tournament, she still played well, matching her career low score of 66 three times in 2015 and ranking fourth in the LPGA in putting average in 2016.

Moriya seemed to put it all together in 2017 when she registered another fourth-place finish, and added two second-place and two third-place finishes. She had six more top-10 finishes for a total of 11, almost twice as many as she'd accumulated in the four previous seasons. Moriya also earned more than \$1.3 million that year, slightly more than she'd made in her entire career.

This season, Moriya is showing that 2017 was no fluke. She finally secured her first win in April, at the HUGEL-JTBC LA Open notching six more top-10 finishes in her first 15 events of the season. That victory made Moriya and Ariya only the second pair of sisters — and the first of Asian descent — to win on the LPGA. And the win put Moriya in second place for the Race to the CME Globe and fifth on the Rolex Rankings.

Ariya, the player above Moriya in both season-spanning leaderboards, has been having an even better season — and career — than her older sister. Ariya qualified two years after Moriya did and got off to a slower start, failing to win the 2015 Rookie of the Year award after a good season of four top-10 finishes.

But Ariya made up for lost time in 2016.



Photo/Jorge Lemus/NurPhoto/Sipa USA (Sipa via AP Images)



Photo/Amy Lemus/NurPhoto/Sipa USA (Sipa via AP Images)

In addition to achieving the top spot in the world, she became the first Thai golfer to win a major tournament when she won the Women's British Open. That season, she also led the tour with five victories, becoming just the second player ever to win Rolex Player of the Year, Race to the CME Globe, and the LPGA Official Money Title in the same season.

Ariya started strong in 2017, with eight top-10 finishes in her first 10 tournaments, four of them in either second or third place. A victory at the Manulife LPGA Classic seemed to portend another amazing season for her. Then an old shoulder injury flared up, and Ariya endured a horrible string of 13 tournaments in which she withdrew once,

failed to make the cut five times, and finished inside the top 20 just once.

She righted the ship in time to win the season-ending CME Group Tour Championship, but it wasn't enough to boost Ariya to the top of any of the season leaderboards. She still finished in fifth in the Rolex Rankings and ninth for the Race to the CME Globe — the latter just one spot behind sister Moriya.

This different level of play between the sisters is consistent with a pattern recognized by Lynn Marriott, one of the performance coaches shared by the Jutanugarns. Marriott said, "Ariya's highs are really high and her lows are really low ... [Moriya] is so different, not too high and not too low, not as extreme."

TOP THAI STARS. Moriya Jutanugarn (top photo) of Thailand tees off on the third hole at the Meijer Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) Classic golf tournament at Blythefield Country Club in Belmont, Michigan. In the bottom photo, Ariya Jutanugarn of Thailand hits a ball from the 8th tee at Blythefield Country Club. Sisters Moriya and Ariya have both found success so far this season.

This season, both of them look like they're finally hitting their high points together. Through 15 tournaments, Moriya has seven top-10 finishes, including the win at the LA Open, plus a second- and a third-place finish. Ariya has 10 top-10 finishes over the same span, seven of them in the top five, including the top spot at the Kingsmill Championship and her second major tournament win at the U.S. Women's Open.

For all their shared successes, the sisters don't like to compare themselves to each other. After Moriya's win, she said of comparisons to her sister, "I have my own way to do things and she has her own way." And Ariya agreed, saying, "We never compare each other. We just know [we do] our best and try our hardest."

Even though Ariya has enjoyed more success on the leaderboard, and despite their protests, the sisters are having similar statistical seasons in 2018. In addition to the other leaderboards where they're currently rubbing elbows, the sisters are first and second on the tour this season in both birdies and top-10 finishes. The Jutanugarns both have eight eagles, tied for second place on the tour, while Ariya is first in the official money rankings and Moriya is third.

All kinds of sister records remain within their reach, both this season and beyond. If they can both stay hot this season, they could become the first sisters ever to finish in the Top 10 of the Rolex Rankings. And if — or perhaps when — Moriya wins her first major, the Jutanugarns would be the first sisters to win LPGA majors.

At a time when Asian women are dominating the LPGA, the laws of probability might have predicted that two of the best would be sisters. But statistics could not have predicted how these two competitors support each other, keeping their competitiveness on the course separate from their close relationship away from it. The combination is just one more reason Asian sports fans will be watching women's golf with more interest than any other sport.

Malaysia to sell bling seized in ex-prime minister's probe

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into 1MDB that were stifled under Najib's rule, and barred Najib and his wife from leaving the country. Mahathir, previously prime minister for 22 years until 2003, was spurred out of retirement by the 1MDB scandal. Anti-graft officials have said Najib may face criminal charges soon.

Lim said allegations that surfaced in 2015 that some \$700 million from 1MDB was channeled into Najib's bank accounts were the "game changer" that prompted Mahathir, 92, to work with former foes including himself and others who were jailed during Mahathir's first stint as leader.

Rocket developed by Japan startup in flames after liftoff

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in 2005 by maverick entrepreneur Takafumi Horie, founder of internet service provider Livedoor, who was joined by science journalists and other space fans in an effort to develop a small, lightweight, and low-cost rocket to send information satellites into space.

"I said no one is so stupid to put money into his own personal bank account especially if you are dealing with the prime minister. Who is stupid to do that," he said. "But when we discovered that that is indeed the truth, we were shocked beyond belief."

If Najib had won another term, Lim said Malaysia would've plunged into a "deeper black hole."

"Imagine if they had won another term, the glass would be empty," he said. "The glass half full will allow us to rehabilitate our finances, to recuperate so that we can be reinvigorated to be a dynamic economy."

Lim, who recently revealed graft in

some projects linked to 1MDB after opening up access to files in the Finance Ministry previously limited only to a top few, said he believed most of the mega scandals have been uncovered.

But he said there are many "mini 1MDB" scandals on a smaller scale that will be revealed over time.

Mahathir is expected to hand over the baton to reformist leader Anwar Ibrahim under an election pact after they agreed to bury a two-decade feud. Anwar's wife, who is currently the deputy prime minister, will step down at the time, Lim said.

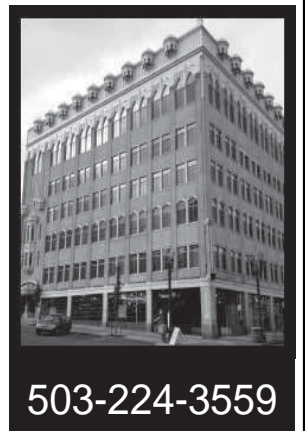
"It is a question of timing," he said. "We know who is the next prime minister."



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