

Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

LPGA season punctuated by drama, South Korean dominance

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

In this highly unusual season, one thing remains perfectly normal in the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA): players with Asian heritage dominate. The LPGA measures the success of its golfers with the Rolex Rankings; at the end of November, eight young, dynamic players with Asian roots were in its top 10. Most, if not all, of those eight will play in December's season finale, the United States Women's Open Championship. How they play could affect both the Rolex Rankings and South Korea's Olympic team.

The top four South Korean players on the Rolex Rankings make their Olympic team, but the selection faces a double COVID-19 whammy. Postponing the Olympics due to coronavirus extended the competition for those four spots. And by halting the LPGA season, it affected how those Rolex Rankings are calculated.

In normal times, the rankings are usually affected by more recent tournament scores, and rankings drop when players don't compete. No LPGA tournaments were held for nearly six months, so when play resumed, some players did not compete for safety reasons. In light of this, the rules were temporarily changed to update players' Rolex Rankings only during weeks when they play.

By playing in the LPGA of Korea (KLPGA), several South Korean players benefitted from that rule change, including Hyo Joo Kim, currently tenth in the Rolex Rankings. Kim debuted on the LPGA tour in 2015, winning her first major with the lowest score ever for an LPGA major championship round.

Since then, Kim has won twice and finished in the top 10 at 38 others. This year, Kim has played only in the lower-ranked KLPGA, keeping her ranking right behind that of her countrywoman, Sung Hyun Park.

Park roared onto the LPGA scene in 2017, becoming the first player since 1978 to win both Rookie of the Year and Player of the Year awards. Park won two tournaments that year, including one major, and then won three tournaments, including another major, in 2018.

In 2019, Park won twice before a shoulder injury curtailed her season. The coronavirus break allowed her to rehabilitate her shoulder, though it also

□

Volunteers spend Sundays to help Singapore's less fortunate

Continued from page 2

there for them."

"One Good Thing" is a series that highlights individuals whose actions provide glimmers of joy in hard times — stories of people who find a way to make a difference, no matter how small.

□

Facing pandemic economic woes, Nepal reopens

Continued from page 5

Still, with the virus still surging in many parts of the world, it will take time for things to return to normal.

On a recent day in the tourist hub of Thamel in Kathmandu, most of the shops, restaurants, pubs, and hotels remained closed. The shops normally selling down jackets, tents, hiking boots, and survival equipment were mostly closed and those that were open had few if any customers.

"We have not seen any customer since March in my shop," said Bir Lama, who sells hiking and mountaineering gear. "While I am paying rent, draining my savings, I am keeping the shop open only to keep myself from going insane."



AP Photo/Chris Szagola



AP Photo/Chris O'Meara



AP Photo/Chris Szagola

made her a bit rusty. In five tournaments since the break, Park's best finish was 17th place, dropping her from fourth to ninth in the Rolex Rankings, representing the fourth spot on the South Korean Olympic team.

Just ahead of Kim is Australia's Minjee Lee, born in Perth to South Korean parents. Since her 2015 LPGA debut, Lee has won five times, peaking in 2018, when she notched 13 top-10 finishes, three second-place finishes, and her fourth Tour victory.

In 2019, Lee rose to second in the Rolex Rankings, then slipped to third early this season before falling to ninth. One top-10 and three top-5 finishes since the break brought her back into eighth, right behind Nasa Hataoka, the lone Japanese golfer in Rolex's top 10.

Hataoka is also the youngest in the top 10, a familiar feeling for her. In 2016, she was the youngest winner at the Japan Women's Open Championship and the youngest player at the Final Stage of the LPGA Qualifying Tournament, where she earned her LPGA tour card.

After struggling with homesickness as a rookie, Hataoka brought her mom on tour in 2018 and hit her stride. She won twice that season and finished in the top 10 eleven times, then won again in 2019 with five more top-10 finishes.

This season, Hataoka twice finished in second place before leaving for Tokyo during the pandemic. After returning, she notched three top-10 finishes and is one slot behind Canadian Brooke Henderson in the Rolex Rankings.

Occupying fifth place in the Rolex Rankings is the legendary Inbee Park. Among the first South Korean LPGA superstars, Park has won 20 tournaments, including 7 majors, since joining the LPGA

□

Japan Nobel laureate Koshiba, who found neutrinos, dies at 94

Continued from page 5

confirmed and extended Davis' work, and also discovered neutrinos coming from distant supernova explosions, some of the brightest objects in the universe.

Koshiba's contribution led to subsequent discoveries. His student, Takaaki Kajita, won the Nobel Prize in physics in 2015 for research at the Super-Kamiokande facility that found neutrinos have mass.

Koshiba was active in science education for young people, and established a basic science foundation using his Nobel Prize award to provide learning experiences for high school and college students.

A native of Toyohashi in central Japan, Koshiba graduated from the University of Tokyo in 1951 and studied in the United States before returning to Japan in 1958 to pursue his research.

tour in 2007. But she has struggled since 2015, winning only three tournaments, and no majors.

This season, Park started with a victory and a second-place finish, and she remained hot after the break, finishing in the top 10 of three of her next five tournaments. Park now sits close behind Korean-American Danielle Kang, whose rise nearly overlaps with Park's decline.

Kang joined the LPGA Tour in 2012, but she didn't notch a Tour win until 2017, when she won her first major. Since then, Kang has won four more times, including two wins this season after the break that vaulted her briefly into second place in the Rolex Rankings. Falling to fourth since then, Kang trails fellow American Nelly Korda, who sits a good distance from the top two golfers.

In second place is Sei Young Kim, who won the 2015 Louise Suggs Rookie of the Year Award after winning three tournaments. Since then, Kim has won at least once each year, including three wins last season. She finally won her first major this year, following that with another victory that puts her within striking distance of first place on the Rolex Rankings.

The top position is currently occupied by Jin Young Ko, who dazzled from her first LPGA tournament in 2018, as only the

second player ever to win her Tour debut. Ko had 13 more top-10 finishes that season, clinching the Rookie of the Year award with four events left to play.

But Ko was just getting warmed up. In 2019, she finished over half of her tournaments in the top 10, including four wins (including two majors), three second-place finishes, and five more top-10 finishes. She also shot 114 consecutive holes without a bogey, beating Tiger Woods' record by four.

That season, she topped the LPGA money list, earning the Rolex Player of the Year, along with awards for the lowest scoring average, the best record in major tournaments, and the most top-10 finishes.

This season, however, Ko spent the lockdown playing in the KLPGA, returning to the LPGA in November for just one tournament, tying for 34th. Her KLPGA record kept her atop the Rolex Rankings, but that mediocre finish does not bode well for her chances of holding off a red-hot Sei Young Kim in December's season finale.

However things turn out, COVID-19 has injected plenty of drama into this season, but one thing seems sure: the Rolex Rankings winner will be a young player with roots in South Korea.

For timely updates and to read additional stories, visit www.facebook.com/TheAsianReporter. Recent posts include:

- ♦ Explaining race calls: How AP called the race for Biden
- ♦ Firecrackers and prayers as Indians celebrate Harris' win
- ♦ Does weather affect the spread of the coronavirus outside?
 - ♦ U.S. surpasses 1 million virus cases in just 10 days
 - ♦ In India, polluted air spells trouble for virus patients
 - ♦ Kamala Harris books surge in popularity after election
- ♦ China congratulates Biden on being elected U.S. president
- ♦ Top officials say Nov. 3 election most secure in U.S. history
 - ♦ India celebrates Diwali amid pandemic, pollution fears
- ♦ Trump skips Asian summits as China set to expand influence
 - ♦ What does COVID-19 vaccine effectiveness mean?
- ♦ Kim Ng ready to bear the torch as baseball's 1st female GM
 - ♦ What does emergency use of a COVID-19 vaccine mean?
- ♦ G-20 summit ends with support for COVID-19 vaccines for all
 - ♦ Spike in cases delays Singapore-Hong Kong travel bubble
 - ♦ Tony Hsieh, retired Zappos CEO, dies at age 46
 - ♦ Hawai'i seeks to be seen as a remote workplace with a view
 - ♦ Vietnam has first local transmission in 89 days
- ♦ Are dining tents a safe way to eat out during the pandemic?
 - ♦ Is shopping in stores safe during the pandemic?
- ♦ As virus mutes Dubai nightlife, Filipino bands feel the pain
- ♦ Highway-side eatery in UAE feeds hungry one meal at a time

The Asian Reporter is published on the first Monday each month.

News page advertising deadlines for our next two issues are:

January 4, 2021 edition:

Space reservations due: Wednesday, December 30 at 1:00pm

Artwork due: Thursday, December 31 at 1:00pm

February 1, 2021 edition:

Space reservations due: Wednesday, January 27 at 1:00pm

Artwork due: Thursday, January 28 at 1:00pm

For more information, please contact our advertising department at (503) 283-4440.