



BY
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WHERE ARE ASIA'S MAJOR MEN?

When Yang Yong Eun hunted down Tiger Woods to win the US PGA Championship in 2009, many sage judges predicted the floodgates

would open for Asian golfers at the Major championships. More than six years on from that supposed red-letter day at Minnesota's Hazeltine National Golf Club, we are still waiting for the second Asian Major championship winner to be crowned.

There have been a handful of relatively close calls.

Yang, still on a high following his life-changing success, tied for third at the US Open in 2011, a year after his fellow-Korean Choi Kyung Ju had ended joint-fourth

at Augusta National in the Masters tournament.

Japanese wonder boy Hideki Matsuyama has posted top-10 finishes at the Masters, US Open and British Open, while Indian Anirban Lahiri was equal-

fifth in this year's US PGA Championship.

Despite those gallant efforts, Asian golfers in general have under-achieved in the four tournaments which remain the yardstick by which golfing greatness is measured.

Just consider that arguably the most noteworthy performance by an Asian on the Major championship stage this decade was provided by Chinese amateur Guan Tianlang.

At the 2013 Masters tournament, Guan, at the ripe old age of 14 years and five months, became the youngest player to make the cut in a Major. Yet, as of mid-October, he was rated only as third-best Chinese amateur and 187th in the World Amateur Golf Ranking.

Nonetheless, Guan's remarkable effort on the super-slick greens at Augusta was a wonderful personal achievement... and also, it could be argued, a damning indictment of Asian professionals and the Tours on which they perform.

If you believe the propaganda we're routinely fed, the professional game has never been in a more healthy state. Officials and administrators tell us there are now greater playing opportunities and clearer career paths for young golfers than ever before and that Asians are making a greater mark in the world game.

Evidence from the Official World Golf Ranking [OWGR] does not back them up.

As of Oct 11, Matsuyama [15th] was the only Asian in the OWGR's top-30 while 24 Asians were listed in the top-200.

Go back 15 years to the first rankings of the millennium and there were 28 Asians in the top-200 with Japan's Masashi "Jumbo" Ozaki leading the way for the region in 37th spot.

Let's travel back even further, to April 1986 when the rankings were launched.

Then, there were 14 Asians in the top-100. Tsuneyuki "Tommy" Nakjima was seventh and was joined in the top-25 by Japanese compatriots Isao Aoki and Masahiro Kuramoto.

The Asian Tour recently announced what it described as "a consolidation of its partnership with the European Tour".

According to Asian Tour CEO Mike Kerr, this will greatly enhance the landscape of professional golf around the world, and particularly in Asia.

Kerr said: "This will benefit both memberships in creating greater playing and earning opportunities, while also establishing a defined career pathway for all players.

"By combining strength with strength, we will ensure that professional golf in Asia will continue to enjoy sustained growth in the long-term; plus deliver a stronger platform for our members to excel. This initiative will ultimately create an inimitable platform that will enhance our appeal to sponsors, partners and golf fans around the world."

Enticing sound bytes perhaps. Yet based on what's gone before, followers of the professional game in Asia could be forgiven for remaining sceptical.

On the plus side, there is a wealth of precocious talent coming through.

Reference this month's Asia Pacific Amateur Championship where 17-year-old Chinese Jin Cheng booked himself a starting place in the 2016 Masters tournament.

There were also encouraging cameos from the best young guns in Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

Soberingly for Asia's "rising stars", however, the final leaderboard was top heavy with representatives from Australia and New Zealand – illustrating how much strength in depth there is at the elite level of the game.

And take a quick glance at the top-three in the OWGR – American Jordan Spieth, aged 22, Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy, 26, and Australian Jason Day, 27. You'd imagine they'll be around for quite a while yet.

What golf fans and sponsors would give for a fresh-faced Asian to join that trio and form an awesome foursome to drive the game forward.

Is there anyone ready to step up to the plate?

photos: Afp and courtesy of Asia-Pacific Amateur Championship



HIDEKI
MATSUYAMA

GUAN
TIANLANG