

BY GODFREY ROBERT

NEW TANJONG

ALL SET TO WELCOME THE WORLD'S BEST

WORLD NO. 1 FENG AND COMPANY READY TO LIGHT UP SENTOSA GOLF CLUB

f the Singapore Open, since its rebirth in 2005, has raised the status of Sentosa's

Serapong course, the staging of the HSBC Women's World Championship should do likewise for the club's other layout, the New Tanjong.

And it is a credit to the Sentosa Golf Club management that whatever the magnitude of the event – from the US\$6 million Barclays Singapore Open to the simple Singapore Golf Association junior circuit – the organisers have never left any stone unturned in the preparations.

With just four days to go to the 2018 HSBC Women's Champions showpiece, the club has prepared the New Tanjong to its pristine best with this week's Asia-Pacific Women's Amateur Championship used as more than a test-pad for the women's "Major".

The HSBC Women's World Championship is probably the biggest golf event Singapore has staged in the past five years because the prize-money is the highest (US\$1.5 million) and the field glitters with many of the top 50 women invited players raring to go for the US\$225,000 top prize.

Proud sponsors HSBC, who have done yeomen service to many sports such as football and rugby, brought the event to Singapore in 2008 and Tanah Merah Country Club's renowned Garden course staged the event until 2012.

The Serapong course, which has been the exclusive venue for the men's Singapore Open in recent years, offered itself from 2013 to 2016.

And when the New Tanjong was redeveloped in 2016, it became a perfect venue for the event, judging by the high praise from the world's best women golfers last year.

With a limited field of around 65 players, there is no cut, so fans will get to see all the players over four exciting rounds on the par-72 layout.

This year, many eyes will be on new World No. 1 Shanshan

Feng of China, the first golfer, male or female, from the world's most populous country to sit atop the world rankings.

After winning two back-to-back titles, the second at the Blue Bay LPGA on Hainan island in China that allowed her to take over the perch from South Korean Park Sung Hyun last November, Feng said: "When I finally see the Chinese flag on top of the ranking, I feel all the efforts over the past 18 years on golf is worth it."

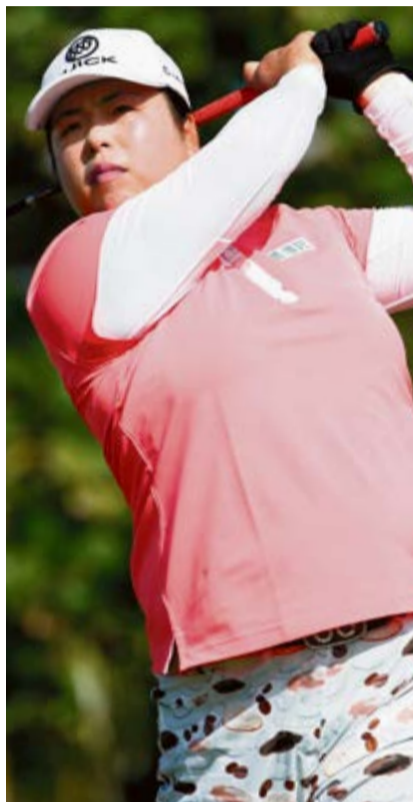
"I really enjoy the moment and hopefully this could encourage a younger generation in China to go for the sport," added Feng, who won her only career Major by capturing the Wegmen's LPGA Championship in 2012.

The competition for the HSBC event is expected to be wide open as it is anybody's game considering the wealth of talent that abound. Added to that expectation is the fact that with five players achieving World No. 1 in 2017 – prior to Feng's ascendancy, Lydia Ko, Ariya Jutanugarn, So Yeon Ryo and Park Sung Hyun held the honour – no one player holds the dominance.

With the only two-time winner and defending champion, the battle-hardened Park Inbee (No. 13) also in the party, her South Korean legion (with 10 players in the world top 20) is a force to be reckoned with.

World-class golf aside, the HSBC Women's World Championship is also known for its celebration of food and music, not forgetting the free clinics offered by some of the top players.

And this is a great opportunity for aspiring local juniors, male and female, to watch and learn from the world's best players.



World No. 1 Shanshan Feng (above).

BIG BOOST FOR JUNIOR GOLFERS



Against a gloomy backdrop where anecdotal evidence suggests that fewer juniors are taking up the sport in Singapore, the Singapore Golf Association is working overtime to arrest the situation.

More and more junior golf tournaments are being held in Singapore and the SGA is willing to work with clubs and coaches to push the game through to the youngsters.

The SGA hopes that the 2018 Optimist International Junior Golf Championship Qualifiers 2018 at Sentosa's New Tanjong course on March 27 and 28 will provide a boost for the juniors.

A field of 100 juniors – boys' from 10 to 18 years in four divisions and girls' from 10 to 18 years in three divisions – are slated to compete in the international event.

The winner and runner-up of each division will be invited to play at the 2018 Optimist International Junior Golf Championship World Finals in Florida, United States.

The closing date is March 16 and charges are \$250 (locals) and \$290 (foreigners).

Another junior event that has interested juniors is the 12th Nick Faldo Series Asia Grand Final in Vietnam from March 1 to 3. Held at the famed Laguna Lang Co course, voted the Best Golf Resort in Vietnam in 2017 by Golf Digest, the event, featuring more than 90 golfers, will be graced by Major winner Sir Nick Faldo.

The non-profit event is dedicated to golfers between the ages of 12 and 21, who will be playing 54 holes (with no cut) for the Faldo Trophy.

One player to watch is Shannon Tan (inset), 13, who is currently competing in the Women's Amateur Asia Pacific Golf Championship at the New Tanjong course with five other Singaporeans, Callista Chen, 20, Jacqueline Young, 19, Sarah Tan, 20, Inez Ng, 15, and Nicole Mok, 18.

The highly-talented Shannon made the halfway cut along with Callista. — Godfrey Robert

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