

BY
BENNY TEO

SINGHA LAGUNA PHUKET OPEN

WIRE-TO-WIRE VICTORY

FAMILY SUPPORT BEHIND
VARANYU'S FIRST PRO WIN

Thailand's Varanyu Rattanaphiboonkij savoured his first professional victory in front of his family after closing with an even-par 70 to win by six shots in the final round of the Singha Laguna Phuket Open recently.

Held between May 10-13, this represents the second year in running that Laguna Golf Phuket has hosted the THB2 million (approx. US\$64,000) event co-sanctioned by the ADT and the All Thailand Golf Tour.

The 21-year-old victor displayed great form all week as he traded two birdies against as many bogeys on the final day to secure his wire-to-wire Asian Development Tour (ADT) victory on 18-under-par 262 total at Laguna Golf Phuket.

Compatriot Pawin Ingkhapradit returned with an impressive 66, but he was unable to overhaul Varanyu's lead. He took second-place on his own. South African Mathiam Keyser signed for a 69 to take third place, marking his best finish on the ADT this season.

Nitithorn Thippong of Thailand, who started the final round in second, struggled with nerves and dropped two places after carding a 71 while Sweden's Oscar Zetterwall (67) and Thailand's Worrasorn Suwanpanang (68) shared fifth place on 272 at the Tour's eighth leg of the season.

Playing in the final group for the first time in his professional career, Varanyu was surprised by his father and sister who flew down from his hometown of Phetchaburi, Thailand, to watch him play.

"It feels like a dream! I have worked so hard all year and to finally get a win and in Thailand is amazing. My mother has been following me all four days and I didn't know my father was going to come. It makes me so happy that they got to see my first win," said Varanyu, who also had his brother on his bag this week.

Varanyu dropped a shot on the first hole but would soon recover with a birdie on hole three. He maintained a steady momentum with nine pars, before dropping another shot on hole 13

due to an errant drive. He finished out his last five holes with a birdie on 14 when he made an up-and-down from 15 yards followed by four more pars.

"After I made bogey on hole one, my brother just told me to stay calm and not speed up my tempo. I was nervous but having my whole family there to support me helped. He would distract me from the scores and I just stuck to the game plan of playing like I did the past three days," added Varanyu.

Sticking to his tee-to-fairway-to-green game plan, Pawin fired four birdies in a bogey-free round to match his low round one score.

"The highlight of today's round would have to be hole 16 when I missed the green to the left and chipped in for birdie from 15-yards. I hit everything well today and my tempo was good. I am pretty happy with my second-place finish especially since I played all four rounds under par this week. I felt like I was really focused on my game plan and not thinking about other people today," said the 26-year-old.

After this win, Varanyu took up membership on the ADT and is currently 10th on the merit rankings. He took home a winner's prize purse of US\$9,450 and six Official World Golf Ranking points while the top-six players and ties earned points on a sliding scale.

Laguna Phuket's managing director, Ravi Chandran, and assistant vice president and director of golf, Paul Wilson, have long-range plans for this event. In particular, they want to develop the professional tournament into a week-long celebration of golf that involves amateur players of all levels and abilities.

"The Laguna Phuket triathlon, which this year celebrated 25 years, and the marathon, being held in June for the 13th year, are highly-recognised



Thailand's Varanyu Rattanaphiboonkij, winner of the Singha Laguna Phuket Open.

events that attract thousands of participants and spectators from around the world," explained Ravi.

"They have helped make Phuket an international sporting hub, with Laguna Phuket as the centrepiece. We believe the Singha Laguna Phuket Open can become equally well-known among golfers and be the third mantle in the island's and resort's sporting calendar," he concluded.

This means extending the current programme of a pro-am on the Wednesday before the tournament and a "play like the pros" round on the day after its conclusion to a range of individual and team golf events for amateurs, spread over a week.

And according to Wilson, the golf tournament can also be expanded to include individual amateur and team events, similar to those organised around the triathlon and marathon.

"There are numerous short-distance, team and other activities associated with the triathlon and marathon," he explains.

"The full distance of both events attracts elite contestants and serious competitors from all over the world.

But there are other shorter and less intense variations for people of all ages and abilities and we believe the golf tournament can be extended in a similar way."

LEADING FINAL SCORES

262: Varanyu Rattanaphiboonkij 62 61 69 70

268: Pawin Ingkhapradit 66 69 67 66

270: Mathiam Keyser 66 67 68 69

271: Nitithorn Thippong 64 66 70 71

272: Oscar Zetterwall 64 67 74 67, Worrasorn Suwanpanang 68 67 69 68

273: Tawan Phongphun 68 69 70 66, John Michael O'Toole 65 71 69 68

274: Itthipat Buranatanyarat 73 68 68 65

● The leading five players on the ADT Order of Merit at the end of the season will earn playing rights on the premier Asian Tour for the 2019 season.