

FIRE THAT KEEPS BURNING

Singapore's number one golfer for numerous years, veteran professional Mardan Mamat, now 51 years old, is still going strong as we caught up with him at the Staysure Tour's (formerly Senior European Tour) MCB Tour Championship event early December.

"I just turned 51 and there's not many senior tournaments in Asia, so to get an opportunity to play in a European senior is a good experience. First time in Mauritius was three years back (at the tri-sanctioned AfrAsia Bank Mauritius Open) and I played well, came in top five.

"It's different playing the main tour and the senior tour. It's more relaxed here, even the players, while still competitive are more relaxed," said the veteran golf professional over breakfast at the Constance Belle Mare Plage where he had been staying for the week of the event.

His first attempt at the 450,000 euros (\$705,000) season-ending double billing that included another week in Seychelles for the senior tour's top 30 players saw him finish a respectable tied-17th in a field of 50 players, and

earning \$10,000 for his effort. However, he finished the season at 48th on the money list after 10 events and missed the trip upwards the Indian Ocean for the finale.

Nevertheless, he credited former Asia number one Thaworn Wiratchant as motivation to do well at Mauritius.

"I spoke to Thaworn about a week before we came here and he told me he shot 10 under in the last round to win the tournament last year. That's very impressive. So I asked about the golf course and he said it was short, it was easy. It's just a putting competition, so if you putt good, you can win."

While he did not follow suit by winning, Mardan was glad to see familiar faces from when he competed on the European Tour in his younger days, particularly the time after his momentous victory on home soil at the OSIM Singapore Masters.

"We competed at the same age and it's great to see all of them as seniors again. Not many players get this opportunity to still play golf at 50 years old and make some money, so I'm very blessed," he said.

At his age, Mardan is still not letting up, competing in the Asian Tour with exemption earned from a strong career money list ranking, as well as playing a series of events on the Staysure Tour.

"Beginning in summer, I spent four weeks in Europe playing in Switzerland, Germany and British Seniors and Scotland. Then I came back for two weeks before going back for another four weeks to play two tournaments in England, one in Bulgaria and one in Scotland. So I spend about two months in Europe. It's good.

"It's just that sometimes it gets really lonely being away for months, but when I play golf, I don't feel that way. I've been playing for so many years, but I'm still getting used to it," he con-

fessed.

As for the future of professional golf in Singapore, he offered a stern warning.

"Sorry to say that we are in the wrong country to build up this game. It's not that I don't like Singapore but to build up your game here is very difficult, whereas in Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia or India, they have their own domestic tour, so even when they are not playing on the Asian Tour, when they go back home, they have their own tour to play.

"Here in Singapore, we don't have that. Most of my career, I have to travel a lot. The only thing we play in Singapore is the Singapore Open and last time we had the Singapore Masters but now, we only have the Singapore Open.

"Look at Thailand. Every year they produce an up-and-coming star. Why? Because they have their own domestic tour (All Thailand Golf Tour) and in a year, they have 15 to 20 events. Next year, the Thai tour will be all world ranking events. That's how the Thai players can develop very fast and that's why they are very competitive.

"That's already proof that this is what you need to do if you want to produce future Asian top players."

As to his own future, he looked to the past for an answer.

"Golf is a struggle. My only mistake that I made, at nine years old, I told myself I want to be the top professional in Singapore and I got it. That's the mistake I made. I didn't wish myself to be world number one," he reflected wistfully.

"It's a bit emotional for me, when I think of the past, it's always that way. I don't know, I'll see my body, I'll see how it goes. I hope to continue playing till I'm 60 but now I give myself up to 55 and see how my fitness is.

"If my body allows me, I aim to be the number one senior in the world. I'm quite fortunate to still compete at the highest level. Some of my old colleagues have already left the tour and I still have my career money in the Asian Tour, which means I can play there for another two or three years," said the proud Singaporean athlete.



photo by Mark Sampson

Mardan Mamat (left) in action at the MCB Tour Championship in Mauritius.

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