

One of the more remarkable golfing stories of the 'noughties', as the first decade of the 21st century has been dubbed, was the way in which South Korea established itself as a genuine global force in the women's game. How did it happen ... and how can we explain the success of the ever-expanding 'Seoul Sisterhood' on the US LPGA Tour, the world's foremost women's circuit? *Asian Golf Monthly* investigates.

The Korean Phenomenon



Choi Na-yeon (left) and Shin Ji-yai stride along the fourth fairway during the final round of last year's LPGA Samsung World Championship at California's Torrey Pines Golf Course. Choi won the tournament. Picture by Donald Miralle/Getty Images.



IT WOULD BE UNDERSTATING the case to say that the rise to prominence of lady professional golfers from South Korea over the last decade has been astonishing. You only have to consider that frequently up to 30 per cent of the field at US LPGA Tour events are comprised of players of Korean nationality or descent to realise that.

Furthermore, Korea now boasts its own rapidly expanding LPGA Tour, offering a viable career path – and considerable financial encouragement – to the new generation of young Korean girls who are primed to become an even more dominant force in the global game in the next 10 years ... and beyond.

So, what factors have led to this explosion of outstandingly talented and driven Korean lady golfers?

In a recent article in *USA Today*, **Yu In-chon**, Korea's Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism, was quoted as saying: "I think women in our country, even more so than men, are very competitive. If you're a pro golfer in Korea, that means you're a serious player. They believe they can compete well."

One of the many promising young Korean players upon whom much expectation is being heaped is **Jessica Ji**. She agrees with Yu's assertion – and has credible hopes that 2010 will be a breakthrough year for her in the search for fairway fame and fortune.

A member of the Ladies European Tour (LET), 19-year-old Ji is a student of **Jonathan Wallett** at the Elite Coaching Golf Academy and was based for the 2009 season at the Evian Masters Training Centre in France.

Working with her in Evian and at tournaments on the LET allowed *Asian Golf Monthly* contributor Wallett to study at first hand the difference in mentalities between the Koreans and players from the Western world.

Given that he'd also had the opportunity to spend some time at the David Leadbetter Golf Academy (DLGA) at Woo

Joon Hills near Seoul in 2007, Wallett is better positioned than most to pass comment on the phenomenon that is the success of Korean women golfers at just about all levels of the game.

"The quality and quantity of teenage players was truly staggering," he said, referring to the time spent in Seoul. "It's clear that Korean domination of ladies professional golf is not going to come to an end any time soon."

According to **Robin Symes**, director of the DLGA Korea, there is not one single reason attributable to their success, but more a combination of factors. When put together, these factors form a formidable 'success force'.

Cultural considerations play a major role. In Korea, says Wallett, golf is not viewed as a sport for fun, more so as a potential career pathway. He says the Koreans view golf like a person in Swit-

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zerland would view a career in 'architecture'. Most people in Switzerland would not study architecture at university if they did not have the ambition of one day becoming an architect.

Symes cites that he does not have one junior in his academy that plays golf just for fun. Young people play because they aspire to emulate role models like **Pak Se-ri** and make a successful career in golf.

Ji backs up that very point. She says: "I saw Se-ri win the US Open on TV and the next week I asked my Dad to take me with him as he regularly goes to the driving range."

"From there I started to compete in regional junior age tournaments, and then watching the LPGA golf every week on Korean TV with more and more Koreans succeeding and winning gave me the belief that one day I can be like them."

Ji's case is by no means isolated. Listen

to any number of the Korean girls now plying their trade so diligently in America and they'll relate a similar tale as to how and why they took up the game and what motivated them to set the bar of expectation so high.

Support structures

While in Korea, Wallett marvelled at 'the excellent competitive structure for junior golf all the way through to a professional Tour, just within the country'. There is even a second level Tour, acting as a feeder to the main Tour.

"Critically, there is no handicapping system in Korea for juniors," said Wallett. "All the tournaments are gross score only, so juniors quickly learn to compete and to make the cut in under-14 events you need to shoot under par."

Wallett also noted how the Korean Golf Association (KGA) puts most of its resources into developing these tournament structures, and sending its top players to international tournaments. Meanwhile, the development of the player – the coaching side – is left to

private golf academies, of which there are many.

Almost all the young junior players belong to an 'academy' where they would pay typically US\$800 per month, just for four hours of group lessons per week. There may be up to 10 promising juniors in each group. This means that if the academies don't perform in helping their students' progress, the players have many different alternatives, and academies that have developed big-name Tour players can charge a premium.

DLGA instructor Symes, coach to LPGA Tour star **Choi Na-yeon**, charges US\$320 per hour and is fully booked all year. The KGA may sponsor or contribute to the training costs of some players through this private academy structure.

Golf club membership is very expensive, almost always above US\$200,000 for a club within a two-hour drive of Seoul. However, many memberships are bought





Peter Nicholson of Rolex poses with the six LPGA Tour first-time winners in 2009, four of whom were Korean – (from left to right) Ai Miyazato (Japan), Shin Ji-yai, Choi Na-yeon, Yi Eun-jung, MJ Hur and Anna Nordqvist (Sweden). Picture by Scott Halleran/Getty Images.

by companies and not private individuals, and golf is seen as an important tool for the development of corporate business.

In fact, the Korean Government even 'taxes' each round of golf! The golf-playing population in South Korea is now estimated at about four million – one in every 12 people in the country.

However, due to the expense of membership, and lack of courses, the private adult golfer usually only plays several times a year within Korea, and would typically play most of their golf during foreign holidays. Most adult players spend the majority of time at the infinite quantity of driving ranges that can be found everywhere, even at the top of shopping malls in the heart of Seoul.

Juniors do not normally have 'direct' memberships – they have restricted 'use' to a course, usually through their acad-

emy membership, although most of their course play will be during tournaments.

Wallett was also astonished at the work ethic and the ability of Asians to mimic, which he saw when he worked a winter season in Japan in 2003. To illus-

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trate the point, Wallett said: “In Korea and Japan, youngsters are exposed to martial arts from a very early age, and the learning method in this sport is to watch and then copy, and then repeat, repeat and repeat.

“I quickly learned from my experience in Japan that they learn at a much faster rate than Europeans who demand

a much more understanding style of learning as opposed to watch, copy and repeat.

“Asian cultures in general place a much greater emphasis from an early age on the mental development of a person, and Koreans have great mental self control and self discipline. Rarely would you see a Korean player show strong emotions on the golf course. They are able to maintain a very calm demeanour, whether they are playing great ... or are struggling.”

Male disadvantage

As we enter 2010, many are asking whether **Yang Yong-eun's** historic win in last year's US PGA Championship will provide a pathway for Koreans to dominate men's golf in the next decade. Wallett does not think that is likely to be the case 'due to multiple factors'.

Wallett said: “The major factor is that

at the age of around 20, every Korean man must spend two years in the military. The only sporting exception is if you win a gold medal at the Olympics in your sport. This large commitment at a critical stage in a young golfer's development is a tremendous disadvantage.”

Yang and **Choi Kyung-ju**, the two most successful Korean male players, both took up golf relatively late, so the military service was not such a hindrance, argues Wallett.

“Another important factor is that in Korean culture the emphasis is on the education of the male. That's why parents are happy for their girls to quit education relatively early and pursue a career in golf. But it's unlikely to ever become the case with their boys.”

Having said that, Wallett is in no doubt that Yang's victory will have a significant impact on golf, both in Korea and in the Asia Pacific region overall, as it will provide the inspiration and instill the belief that many of his fellow Asian males have the ability to win at the highest level.

Symes said: “The most major effect of Yang's US PGA victory over **Tiger Woods** is that the parents will push the male offspring more. But only once they've completed their education and military service commitments.”

Korean-born, New Zealand raised **Danny Lee**, who won the US Amateur in 2008 and triumphed in the 2009 Johnnie Walker Classic – an event tri-sanctioned by the Tours of Europe, Asia and Australia – will also be instrumental in creating a new wave of Korean male players who believe they can succeed at the highest level.

Another major question that has yet

to be answered is the longevity of careers of the Korean women players. There is only one Korean player over the age of 30 on the LPGA, Pak Se-ri, and it remains to be seen if the success at an early age means it's more difficult to sustain.

And this question of longevity must also be linked to the motivation of the Korean players, suggests Wallett. Korean fathers have a reputation of demanding punishing practice schedules from their girls, a little like the former Eastern bloc athletes endured. This can have a negative effect on motivation over the long term.

To have a long career you need to be intrinsically motivated by passion and a

love of the game, as epitomised by **Tom Watson** and **Laura Davies**.

If a player is more motivated extrinsically – by money, pressure from parents or by the government in the case of Eastern bloc athletes – it will mean it is more difficult to sustain that level of play over the long term.

The growth of Korean ladies golf has been phenomenal over the last 15 years – from nothing to the major global force. That's incredible for a country which has less than 260 golf courses ... most of which were built post-1980.

Now the interest lies in whether the success can be sustained, and if Korean male players start to emerge and develop after the pioneering victory of Yang.



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Jessica Ji and Jonathan Wallett on the driving range.

Safety in Numbers

THERE MAY BE MORE KOREANS that feature in the Rolex Rankings than players of any other nationality, but there remains room at the top for more of the Seoul Sisterhood to make their mark.

In the first rankings released in 2010, there were more Koreans than any other nationality in the top-50 (a total of 19); the top-100 (35) and the top-500 (128).

But at the start of a new decade only one Korean is in the elite top-10. **Shin Ji-yai** (pictured celebrating her **HSBC Women's**

Champions triumph last year) begins 2010 in second place in the standings with world number one **Lorena Ochoa** of Mexico firmly in her sights.

Among those who are expected to break into the top-10 this year are **Kim Song-hee**, **Choi Na-yeon** and **Kim In-kyung**, who ended 2009 on such a high, winning the season-ending Ladies European Tour event in Dubai to climb to 11th. Following are the 19 Koreans who appeared in the top-50 as of January 4:

2, Shin Ji-yai	31, Song Bo-bae	42, Seo Hee-kyung
11, Kim In-kyung	32, Lee Seon-hwa	43, Pak Se-ri
12, Choi Na-yeon	33, Yoo Sun-young	44, Park In-bee
14, Kim Song-hee	36, Park Hee-young	45, MJ Hur
19, Ji Eun-hee	40, Han Hee-won	46, Lee Jee-young
22, Jeon Mi-jeong	41, Oh Ji-young	49, Jang Jeong
29, Lee Ji-hee		

Major Movers

WHILE YANG YONG-EUN is the only Korean male to win a Major championship, his country's female golfers have fared well in the biggest tournaments.

Including **Pak Se-ri's** 1998 breakthrough wins in the McDonald's LPGA Championship and US Women's Open, Koreans have won a total of 11 Major championships.

Five of those belong to Pak (pictured) with the Kraft Nabisco Championship being the only one of the four existing women's Major titles that she has failed to win.

Should she manage to win that, Pak would become only the seventh female golfer to complete the career Grand Slam, following **Louise**

Suggs, **Mickey Wright**, **Pat Bradley**, **Juli Inkster**, **Karrie Webb** and **Annika Sorenstam**.

The six other Korean Major titles have been won by six different players – another clear illustration of the country's golfing depth of talent.

While Pak remains the only Korean winner of the McDonald's LPGA Championship, **Grace Park** is the sole Korean name inscribed on the Kraft Nabisco Championship trophy.

Joining Pak on the Women's British Open roll of honour are **Jang Jeong** and **Shin Ji-yai**, whose 2008 triumph many believe is the first of multiple Major successes.

Meanwhile, in addition to Pak's win in 1998, Koreans have captured the US Women's Open three times in the past five years through **Birdie Kim**, **Park In-bee** and **Ji Eun-hee**.



Winning Performances

IN THE 12 YEARS since **Pak Se-ri** stamped her mark on the world's foremost female circuit, Korean players have amassed a staggering haul of 81 victories on the LPGA Tour – an average of almost seven wins a year.

A total of 26 different Korean players have tasted victory on the US LPGA Tour. No fewer than 13 are multiple winners.

Leading the way, of course, is Pak who collected 21 of her 24 wins between 1998 and 2003.

2009 WINS (11)

Shin Ji-yai (3) – HSBC Women's Champions; Wegmans LPGA; P&G Beauty NW Arkansas Championship
Choi Na-yeon (2) – Samsung World Championship; Hana Bank Kolon Championship
MJ Hur (1) – Safeway Classic
Ji Eun-hee (1) – US Women's Open
Kim In-kyung (1) – LPGA State Farm Classic
Oh Ji-young (1) – Sybase Classic
Song Bo-bae (1) – Mizuno Classic
Yi Eun-jung (1) – Jamie Farr Owens Corning Classic

2008 WINS (9)

Shin Ji-yai (3) – Ricoh Women's British Open; Mizuno Classic; ADT Championship
Lee Seon-hwa (2) – Ginn Tribute hosted by Anika; P&G Beauty NW Arkansas Championship
Ji Eun-hee (1) – Wegmans LPGA
Kim In-kyung (1) – Long Drugs Challenge
Oh Ji-young (1) – LPGA State Farm Classic
Park In-bee (1) – US Women's Open

On the basis of tournament wins, **Kim Mi-hyun** (pictured with fellow Koreans celebrating her triumph in the 2007 SemGroup Championship, her last LPGA Tour win) is the second most successful Korean player with eight triumphs.

Meanwhile, **Han Hee-won**, **Grace Park** and **Shin Ji-yai** all have six wins to their credit.

The following list details all the Korean winners – and the events they've won – since 1998.

2007 WINS (4)

Kim Mi-hyun (1) – SemGroup Championship
Young Kim (1) – LPGA Corning Classic
Lee Seon-hwa (1) – HSBC Women's World Match Play Championship
Pak Se-ri (1) – Jamie Farr Owens Corning Classic

2006 WINS (11)

Han Hee-won (2) – LPGA Corning Classic; Honda LPGA Thailand
Kim Mi-hyun (2) – Ginn Clubs & Resorts Open; Jamie Farr Owens Corning Classic
Hong Jin-joo (1) – Kolon Hana Bank Championship
Jang Jeong (1) – Wegmans LPGA
Kim Joo-mi (1) – SBS Open at Turtle Bay
Lee Mee-na (1) – Fields Open in Hawaii
Lee Seon-hwa (1) – Shoprite LPGA Classic
Pak Se-ri (1) – McDonald's LPGA Championship
Yim Sung-ah (1) – Florida's Natural Championship

2005 WINS (7)

Han Hee-won (1) – Official Depot Championship
Jang Jeong (1) – Women's British Open
Kang Ji-min (1) – LPGA Corning Classic
Kang Soo-yun (1) – Safeway Classic
Birdie Kim (1) – US Women's Open
Lee Jee-young (1) – CJ Nine Bridges Classic
Lee Mee-na (1) – Canadian Women's Open

2004 WINS (4)

Grace Park (2) – Kraft Nabisco Championship; CJ Nine Bridges Classic
Han Hee-won (1) – Safeway Classic
Pak Se-ri (1) – Michelob ULTRA Open

2003 WINS (7)

Pak Se-ri (3) – Safeway PING; Chick-fil-A Charity Championship; Jamie Farr Kroger Classic
Han Hee-won (2) – Sybase Big Apple Classic; Wendy's Championship for Children
Ahn Shi-hyun (1) – CJ Nine Bridges Classic
Grace Park (1) – Michelob Light Open

2002 WINS (9)

Pak Se-ri (5) – Office Depot Championship; McDonald's LPGA Championship; First Union Betsy King Classic; Mobile LPGA Tournament of Champions; CJ Nine Bridges Classic
Kim Mi-hyun (2) – Giant Eagle LPGA Classic; Wendy's Championship for Children
Gloria Park (1) – Sybase Big Apple Classic
Grace Park (1) – Cisco World Ladies Match Play Championship

2001 WINS (7)

Pak Se-ri (5) – YourLife Vitamins LPGA Classic; Long Drugs Challenge; Jamie Farr Kroger Classic; Women's British Open; AFLAC Champions
Gloria Park (1) – Williams Championship
Grace Park (1) – The Office Depot

2000 WINS (2)

Kim Mi-hyun (1) – Safeway LPGA Championship
Grace Park (1) – Kathy Ireland Greens.com LPGA Classic

1999 WINS (6)

Pak Se-ri (4) – ShopRite LPGA Classic; Jamie Farr Kroger Classic; Samsung World Championship; PageNet Championship
Kim Mi-hyun (2) – State Farm Rail Classic; First Union Betsy King Classic

1998 WINS (4)

Pak Se-ri (4) – McDonald's LPGA Championship; US Women's Open; Jamie Farr Kroger Classic; Giant Eagle LPGA Classic

ALL-TIME KOREAN WINNERS ON LPGA TOUR (81)

24 – Pak Se-ri
8 – Kim Mi-hyun
6 – Han Hee-won; Grace Park; Shin Ji-yai
4 – Lee Seon-hwa
2 – Choi Na-yeon; Jang Jeong; Ji Eun-hee; Kim In-kyung; Lee Mee-na; Oh Ji-young; Gloria Park
1 – Ahn Shi-hyun; Hong Jin-joo; MJ Hur; Kang Ji-min; Kang Soo-yun; Birdie Kim; Kim Joo-mi; Young Kim; Lee Jee-young; Park In-bee; Song Bo-bae; Yi Eun-jung; Yim Sung-ah