

singapore **scene**

BY SPENCER ROBINSON

HIS OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP REGRETS

More than four decades may have elapsed since 'Mr Lu' Liang-huan finished runner-up at The Open Championship. But we're still waiting for the first Asian winner of the world's oldest golfing championship. Spencer Robinson looks back at 'Mr Lu's' memorable brush with glory.

It was in 1971 that Taiwan's "Mr Lu" Liang-huan put Asian golf on the world map. Long before the days of live television coverage and international golfing superstars, the humble pro from Taipei came within a whisker of becoming the continent's first Major championship winner.

Yet when Lu pitched up at Royal Birkdale Golf Club 44 years ago, there was precious little fanfare.

Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player, Tony Jacklin and Lee Trevino, the heavyweight foursome of the day, would not have suspected that this smiling and courteous 34-year-old from the Far East might have the temerity to challenge them.

Such was the lack of available information about the original Far East Circuit and the rise of the Royal and Ancient game in Asia that before Lu's arrival in England, few had even heard of this smiling, short-game wizard.

That, though, would soon change, as the former Hong Kong Golf Club teaching professional carved himself a place in Open Championship folklore.

Resplendent in a distinctive pork pie hat, Lu did not take long to make his presence felt, setting out his stall with an opening round of 70, which left him just one shot off the pace set by Americans Trevino and Howie Johnson, England's Jacklin and Argentinian Vicente Fernandez.

Lu was not expected to hang around. But contrary to the predictions of many pundits, he did not disappear after the second round...or the third round...or on the final day.

And with each passing day he further endeared himself to the English galleries.

OFFICIAL ACCOUNT

In the R&A's official account of the tournament, it said after the second round: "Lu turned in a round of 70, his aggregate of 140 meaning he was just one shot off first position and was quickly becoming the crowd favourite."

Paired together with Trevino in the final flight on the last day, it soon became apparent that the winner would come from this group.

"Trevino and Lu quickly became the pairing to watch," said the R&A.

"Both had early birdies, but before long Lu had pushed ahead. Trevino responded quickly and finished the first nine holes in just 31 strokes, compared to Lu's 35."

But the contest was not over, Lu standing his ground while the flamboyant Trevino saw his lead trimmed to one shot after he ran up a double-bogey seven at the long 17th.

More drama unfolded at the home hole.

"At the 18th, Lu's unfortunate second shot hit a female spectator. Worried about her injury, his concentration suffered. But amazingly he rescued a brave birdie-four, but it was not enough. Trevino had put his drive straight down the middle and also finished with a birdie-four.

"His total of 278 meant he had taken the Open Championship by one shot from Lu."

For his efforts, Lu (who went on to win the following week's French Open) earned a cheque for £4,000 (S$8,480).

Nevertheless, it is a measure of the man that Lu was more concerned about the health of the lady he had inadvertently struck on the last hole than about the size of the cheque he'd take home with him.

"I still remember that last round as if it were yesterday," recalled Lu. "Not winning made me very sad...yes, so sad. That is one of my big regrets.

"I feel that if I had won the British Open that year, more Asian golfers would have been tempted to play in major events in Europe and America. Perhaps if I had won, it would have been different."

Instead, here we are in the lead-up to the 144th Open Championship still awaiting the first Asian winner of the 'Auld Claret Jug'.

So the message to Japan's Hideki Matsuyama, Indian Anirban Lahiri, South Korean An Byeong Hun and all other Asian players in the St Andrews starting line-up is clear.

As Mr Lu himself would say: "You have a chance to create history...for yourselves, your country and your continent. Give it your best shot. We need to make up for lost time."

photo by Spencer Robinson