

photo courtesy of Asian Tour

BASKING IN NOSTALGIA

BY KYI HLA HAN

With the world's oldest Major heading back to the birthplace of golf in St Andrews next month, all eyes will be on the elite field at the 144th edition of The Open Championship. Asian Tour Chairman Kyi Hla Han (above right), regarded as one of the pioneers who put Asian golf on the international map, shares his experience of featuring in The Open at St Andrews in 2000, the year after he won the Order of Merit title in Asia.

The Open Championship is rich in history and for me to play in St Andrews in 2000 was a great honour.

I was exempted into the tournament after winning the Order of Merit in Asia in 1999 which was also a career highlight.

The Old Course is pretty straight forward and I remember we had fantastic weather throughout the week, considering the Scottish weather.

It was a very sunny and warm week.

Tiger Woods ran away with the Claret Jug that year and his strategy was basically to stay away from the notorious pot bunkers.

I recall him teeing off with four- or five-irons on almost every hole and he didn't find a single bunker during those four rounds.

In my first round, I didn't find any bunkers but the greens were not particularly kind to me.

I three-putted on four holes but during the opening day still managed to shoot one-under, which was very encouraging.

On the second day, I was still standing at one-under after eight holes.

I tried to take my chances by driving the greens on some of the shorter holes but I landed in the bunkers on eight and 10 and made a double- and a triple-bogey on those two holes.

That really destroyed my chances of playing well and I ended up missing the cut.

But overall, it was a fantastic experience to be playing in a Major and especially so with the Open Championship being held that year in St Andrews.

I recalled playing alongside Jeff Sluman and Frederick Jacobson and I also enjoyed a fantastic practice round with Bernhard Langer.

I was paired with him during the Malaysian Open a few months earlier and so it was nice to have a practice round with him.

Another good memory was that I also played a practice round with Vijay Singh and the late Seve Ballesteros. Vijay and Seve are old friends of mine and we just got on together really well.

This year, we've got a good mix of Asian Tour players who are really strong and experienced at The Open.

FINE EXAMPLES

Anirban Lahiri and Thongchai Jaidee are fine examples and all our players who are competing at The Open have enjoyed great performances over the past one year.

They have played their way into the Open Championship and are all playing extremely well right now.

Thongchai won his second title on European soil in Sweden last year while Anirban won twice in Malaysia and India in February to break into the world's top-50 which has been fantastic for him.

American David Lipsky, who won the Asian Tour's Order of Merit last year, will be in the field at St Andrews and I expect to see him playing well there as he's a solid player.

His type of game suits St Andrews and I would not be surprised to see him and our other players performing well.

The main thing for them will be to map out the course and come out with a clear strategy and one of it would be to stay away from the bunkers as they can be very penal and treacherous.

The weather could also play a big role in the tournament that week, so our guys must be prepared to play in all kinds of weather conditions.

I'm sure it's going to be another nostalgic walk down memory lane when I get back to St Andrews again.

Even though I'll be attending as a Tour official now, I'm sure it's going to be a surreal feeling all over again.