

THE OLDEST GAME IN WOMEN'S GOLF IS TRULY INTERNATIONAL

BY
BENNY TEO

At the time, the inaugural US Women's Open in 1946 was held at Charleston Country Club in South Carolina, and it was about to set the tone for many great moments to come.

During that time, women's golf in North America had been dominated by Patty Berg, who was also a founding member of the LPGA.

Berg, a member of the World Golf Hall of Fame, was also the first winner of the US Women's Open.

Besides that, she has also 14 other Majors under her belt, making her 15 Major titles the most in the women's game to date. Interestingly, that first national open was to be her only one.

Then came the pair of Babe Didrikson Zaharias and Louise Suggs, of whom the 'Louise Suggs Rolex Rookie of the Year' award was named after.

Babe Zaharias was perhaps the greatest female athlete of all time. Excelling in

the first Major championship in the LPGA came 86 years after Willie Park Snr. was declared "Champion Golfer of the Year" at Prestwick Golf Club at the men's British Open.

basketball, baseball, she had won two Olympic gold medals in track and field before turning professional in golf, winning 10 LPGA Major championships and three US Women's Open titles.

Her compatriot, Suggs, may have one less, but her total of 11 Majors and a dominant display in golf between 1950 and 1960 meant that she was never out of the top three in the money list during that period.

Together with Berg, these three formed the LPGA as founders.

But the record for the most number of wins in the Women's US Open is neither of them. Instead, it goes to two ladies, Betsy Rawls and Mickey Wright, with four apiece.

Between them, they dominated the event from 1951 when Rawls won her first, until 1964, with Wright winning her last. In fact, the five years between 1957 and 1961 saw the two practically handing the trophy back and forth to each other.

Fast forward to the modern era and the most prestigious event in women's golf had become truly international.

The early days saw few foreign winners, most notably Catherine Lacoste, daughter of that famous French tennis star René Lacoste.

Her victory in 1967 was enigmatic for many

reasons.

A lifelong amateur who never turned professional, this win came in only her third professional event and she has, to date, been the only amateur as well as the only French woman to have won a US Women's Open.

It was not until Rolex Testimonee Annika Sorenstam in 1995, that the foreign players began making an impact in this event.

In fact, as prestigious as it is, the US Women's Open is not sanctioned by the Ladies European Tour and the Japanese and Koreans have their own set of Majors.

But Annika's dominance in women's golf between a 10-year period of 1995 and 2005 had given inspiration to young girls the world over to come and be the next 'Annika'.

She has held the record for the most number of professional wins (90) in the history of the game, is still on top of the career money list at US\$22 million more than 10 years after retirement, and has achieved that feat playing 149 fewer events than her nearest competitor.

Her three US Women's Open wins had been exciting to watch, particularly her last, in 2006, which also happens to be her final Major victory.

From the get-go, the Swedish great held the lead together with American Pat Hurst. After four rounds, the women were tied on even par at a very difficult Newport Country Club course. Eventually, it took an additional 18 holes of extra play to settle the score in favour of the Swede.

Today, that renaissance had seen a field that is the most culturally diverse in the history of the tournament and the game. They are so strong that very few have been able to hold dominance for any period of time.

The last four editions of the championship has been won by three different nationalities, with the defending champion, Ariya Jutanugarn, from Thailand.

This is a country where golf only came about in 1924 when Royal Hua Hin was built for the enjoyment of British railway workers and Thai royalty.

Come next week, when the US\$5 million event rolls into the Country Club of Charleston, 73 years after it was first held there, there will be six Thai players out of 100 worldwide who are exempt.

Of course, the Koreans will dominate that long list together with top players from Europe and Japan as well. Even China, a country more known for badminton than golf, will field a handful including former world No. 1, Feng Shanshan.

The biggest prize purse in women's golf is now a truly international event, supported and sponsored by luxury Swiss timekeeper Rolex, and the world is waiting, watching to see who will be crowned champion on June 2.

Patty Berg, Babe Zaharias and Louise Suggs will have been proud of the organisation that they have founded, watching from above.



Ariya Jutanugarn (left) and Annika Sorenstam have many reasons to smile.

photo by Rolex