

BY
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A DREAM COME TRUE

When Kiradech Aphibarnrat becomes just the fifth Thai to play the Masters this month it will be a “dream come true” though his aspirations go well beyond just smelling the flowers and drinking in the atmosphere at Augusta. Although only three players have won the Masters on their debut, Kiradech does not shy away from the somewhat romantic notion that that come the Sunday of tournament week he will by trying on the Green Jacket for size in the Butler Cabin.

“All the top golfers have played the Masters, all the top golfers have worn the Green Jacket,” he said with a sense of awe in his voice.

“I have been watching it on television for 20 years and hoping to get my first invite to play in the Masters. I have qualified for the first time this year and who knows (it could be) my first win. It has been a dream of mine – I believe every kid dreams of playing in the Masters and imagines wearing the Green Jacket. It would be great.”

Dreams aside, Kiradech knows that just being around for the weekend play will be a huge achievement on his first appearance at the Masters.

“I think to play four rounds of golf in Augusta is my main target,” said Kiradech, daydream believer turned pragmatist. “Enjoy the week, enjoy the crowd and the people around me. That is the best way to experience Augusta.”

After a disappointing season in 2014 when the sudden passing of his coach and mentor Natpasit Chokthanasart knocked him off his axis, European Tour victories in the Shenzhen International and the Paul Lawrie Match Play propelled Kiradech to a world ranking of 38th at the end of 2015 and opened the door to all four Majors this season.

However, it was not until the prized Masters invitation from the “Board of Governors of the Augusta National Golf Club” arrived that Kiradech truly believed that he had realised his lifelong ambition.

“It is the best email I have ever read,” said the beefy 26 year old. “I have watched a lot of Augusta on television, now I am so

looking forward to playing there.”

Although Kiradech is not ranked among the longer hitters in world golf, being injury-free has helped him add an extra couple of yards off the tee this year and he feels that his distance allied with a wizardly short game will help him cope with the unique challenges presented by Augusta National.

His readiness for one of the sternest tests in golf was clear during the recent Arnold Palmer Invitational where he shot 65 in the final round to finish joint-sixth. He put on a putting masterclass, holing bomb after bomb and going 72 holes without a three-putt.

Earlier in March at the WGC-Cadillac Championship, Kiradech ranked third in putting, gaining 1.7 strokes on the field per round, and averaged more than 300 yards with his drives.

Those are impressive statistics in anybody’s book and if Kiradech has any self-doubt about his

ability on and around the greens ahead of the Masters he only has to re-read the praise heaped on him by three-time champion Phil Mickelson.

“He’s really a good player, and he hits the ball a long way. I think the greatest strength of his game is his hands, his ability to hit wedges and shots around the greens. I think that’s certainly a strong point,” said Lefty after partnering Kiradech at the 2013 CIMB Classic in Kuala Lumpur, where the Thai finished a single shot shy of a play-off.

The Masters will be Kiradech’s fourth event on American soil this year and he feels pretty much at home in the United States – he is comfortable conversing in English, appreciates Americana and adjusts easily to the different playing conditions in the United States.

Indeed, the US PGA Tour is where he wants to play his golf.

“That is my goal this year, to play full time in the United States,” he said. “I look forward to getting my card and becoming the first Thai player to get a US PGA Tour card.”

“I love the golf courses, I love the people in the States. I have a good op-

portunity to get my card this year. I am playing all four Majors and all four WGC events and those, along with some invites, should be good enough to get my card,” added Kiradech who is well on his way to that target having won US\$271,050 in two events this year.

Kiradech also loves that he is known as “Asia’s John Daly”, a nickname that resonates with American galleries and one that television commentators will latch onto during coverage of the Masters

Like Daly, he is a big man (tipping the scales at 110 kilograms) with a huge appetite for the game and he paid his hero the ultimate compliment by copying his long, loose swing.

“After my first two or three years of playing golf I looked at John Daly’s swing over and over. He has a long back swing and he is a big guy,” said Kiradech.

“He was one of my idols, so I studied him closely. He has won two Majors and is one of the best players in the world. It is my pleasure to go under (the name of) Asia’s John Daly.”

