

## **YANI – PLAYING UP A STORM**

**By Karen Harding**

Commonwealth Golf Club felt the effects of two cyclones during the 2011 ISPS Handa Women's Australian Open. The angry tail of Cyclone Yasi moving south from far north Queensland posed a challenge for ground staff and players alike as well as scheduling problems, while Cyclone Yani simply blew the field away.

Taiwanese Yani Tseng carded rounds of 70, 67, 68, 71 for a total of 16-under and a seven-shot victory. Since the Open became a 72-hole tournament in 1994, the only lower under-par winning total (-22) was recorded by Karrie Webb in 2000 and larger winning margin (11 shots) by Mhairi McKay in 2003.

Perhaps the most significant thing about Tseng's dominant back-to-back win was the impact it had on world rankings, taking her within reach of the coveted number one spot. After her win in 2010 Tseng had expressed her ambition to close the year at the top. She came close, reaching second before finishing the year at five. Few would doubt that when she returns to defend her title in 2012 she will have that world number one next to her name.

Can she make it a hat-trick of Opens? Tseng now joins Webb as the only women to win successive titles in this event's history. But so decisive was her win, and so complete her game in a week when playing conditions changed daily, that the bookies will surely have her at short odds to win three in a row, particularly if the Open returns to Commonwealth. Webb herself concedes that now Tseng has learned to win, she is a tough opponent.

And tough she certainly was.

Where her 2010 title followed a final round birdie blitz, this year's win resulted from solid play and mental focus all week, basically shutting her opponents out after she grabbed the lead on the second day. The expected – and much-anticipated – shootout between Tseng and world number one Jiyai Shin did not eventuate and though each day brought a good round from someone, no other contenders emerged from the pack to pressure the defending champion.

A quick look at Tseng's numbers for the week reveal the demolition job she did on the rest of the field. Carding just two bogeys for the tournament, Tseng hit 65 of 72 greens in regulation, an astonishing 90% strike rate. Throw in some sound putting – particularly to save par on the occasions she was tested – and the writing was on the wall, or in this case the Patricia Bridges Bowl.

That the field included ten of the top 20 on the Henderson List (the LET Order of Merit), including top three Lee-Anne Pace from South Africa and the two Englishwomen Laura Davies and Melissa Reid, as well as four of the top 20 ranked players on the Rolex World Rankings made Tseng's performance even more creditable and her assertion after her victory that she could improve further and had the number one ranking in her sights put her good friend and rival Shin on notice.

Shin, hoping to become the first Korean to win the Open, was equal runner-up on nine-under with fellow Korean Eun Hee Ji and Reid. American Jennifer Song, in her rookie season on the LPGA Tour in 2011, finished fifth on five-under while New Zealand's 13 year old golf prodigy Lydia Ko was

impressive in winning the Silver Salver for the leading amateur, finishing in a tie for 12<sup>th</sup> at three-under.

Things started out well enough for Shin who co-led with Song after the first day with an excellent bogey-free six-under 67 and said she felt she played “easy”.

But day two changed the face of the tournament.

A torrential storm hit Melbourne late Friday afternoon, causing play to be suspended with 58 players, including Shin, still to complete their rounds. Tseng, with the benefit of the earlier tee time, had burned round the course, answering Shin’s first round with a bogey-free 67 of her own. While Shin et al fronted up at dawn on Saturday morning for an initially scheduled 7.30am start – which became 10.30am after ground staff put the course back in playing order (see breakout) - Tseng was able to relax and prepare comfortably for the afternoon start to round three.

By the time play ended in the early evening, it had been a long day for those 58.

Whether this subsequently affected Shin is not clear – she made no excuses – but her game on the final day was not her own. Making uncharacteristic mistakes and even occasionally showing frustration, she went round in 75 against Tseng’s 71.

Tseng noted later that “it was not her today. She was struggling with her woods. I have never seen her hit out of the fairway, she is always in the middle.”

That said, Shin is not known as The Final Round Queen for no reason and both crowd and Tseng kept expecting her to fire. It was not to be. Time after time, spectators would release a disappointed ‘ooh’ as opportunities to take it to the leader evaporated. But in truth, once Tseng birdied the third she was away. Conditions on that last day – a combination of challenging pin placements and a strong southerly wind – made low scoring unlikely. The tournament was Tseng’s to win or lose.

Her only blemish was to three-putt the 13<sup>th</sup>, trying to make eagle, and when Shin birdied it, the door in some hopeful minds was slightly ajar. Tseng quickly slammed shut it again, however, with a brilliant 8-iron approach to less than a metre at the next. From there she had the luxury of just parring in to seal the deal. There was also the opportunity to prepare her victory speech as she made her triumphant walk up the 18<sup>th</sup> fairway.

For Shin, two runner-up finishes in as many starts. In 2008, aged 19, she figured in a stirring playoff at Kingston Heath with her hero Karrie Webb before Webb prevailed. But Shin enjoyed the experience, loved Australia, and said on her arrival this year that she was happy and excited to be back. Let’s all hope she returns in 2012, and not just for rivalries to be renewed. Both she and Tseng have endeared themselves to Aussie crowds through their outstanding golf and impeccable demeanour on and off the course. Both are excellent ambassadors for the game and role models to the many youngsters in the final day crowd.

Eun Hee Ji, the 2009 U.S. Open champion, is another to follow. While reconstructing her swing throughout last year with new coach Ian Triggs – coach of Webb and several others in the field – she had a dismal year result-wise, other than making 18 of 22 cuts, and blew out from a lowest world ranking of 11 to 72. Ji spent the month prior to the Open practising in Queensland under Triggs’

watchful eye. She has now added length and accuracy to her excellent short game and with a tie for second in this event looks to be back on track.

Reid's tournament was nothing if not a wild ride. She topped the most birdies list with 23, five more than winner Tseng, and her putting average at 1.66 per hole was superior to Tseng at 1.76. But her undoing was the 14 shots she lost to par, including the incredible two double bogeys and a triple she incurred at the one hole, the 16<sup>th</sup>. Those seven shots alone account for the difference between her and Tseng.

However in the final round she managed the low round of the day - 68 – one of just two players to break 70, fellow Brit Karen Stupples being the other. More significantly for her, she birdied the last three holes, starting with the 16<sup>th</sup>.

"It's not my favourite hole", she said of it. "I was going to get a big load of dynamite and blow it up but I decided against it. To birdie it was massive. Before those last three holes, my caddie Lee said, 'Right, we're having these three', so it was nice to finish with three birdies."

Reid has now finished third in 2008 and 2009 and second this year in her last four appearances. She is one exciting player.

Of the Aussies, Webb and Katherine Hull finished in a tie with Cindy LaCrosse (USA) for seventh on five-under while Nikki Campbell, at four-under, tied with Stupples for tenth.

Webb was gallant as always but looked a little underdone after two months off and conceded that her mind had been on the cyclone in the area of her hometown in Ayr, North Queensland. Her final round 70 was the third best round of the day. Hull struggled with her game and temper over the first two days, several times taking her hands off the club in follow through, then posted a brilliant 67 on Saturday to give the locals a glimmer of hope for a challenge before fading on Sunday. Campbell, who is largely under the radar because she mainly plays in Japan, is a consistent player on that tour and showed it here for the first three days. She, too, struggled on Sunday.

Having risen from number five to two on world rankings in the week after the Open, Tseng nominated her goals for 2011 as reaching number one and winning the U.S. Open which, if she can pull it off, would give her, at just 22 years of age, a career Grand Slam. And who's to say she can't? In 2010 she went on from her Handa Women's Australian Open victory to claim two majors, the Kraft Nabisco Championship and the RICOH Women's British Open, to go with her 2008 McDonalds LPGA Championship.

Ominously, she now believes both her game and mindset are stronger.

"I just feel much more confident and relaxed. For a while I was thinking too much, I was trying to win, but now I know I don't need to. I just stay focussed on my swing or just play one shot at a time and I know I can win. It makes a lot of difference", she said. "It has always been my goal to be number one and I think I'm getting closer. I'm going to do my best and keep working hard."

So, on to the ANZ RACV Ladies Masters in Queensland and the chance to reach one of those goals, the number one world ranking.

