

## Sports

# Facemasks, silence and social distancing as pro golf resumes in South Korea

## Without spectators the course was devoid of oohs and aahs, or even applause

**YANGJU:** Birdsong and the rattle of the ball dropping into the cup — accompanied by camera shutters — were the only sounds to be heard as professional women's golf entered the post-coronavirus era on a closed South Korean course yesterday.

Spectators were barred from the Lakewood Country Club as the KLPGA Championship got under way in Yangju, northeast of Seoul, with a host of social distancing measures in place to guard against infection.

South Korea is a power in the women's game, providing four of the current world top 10, three of whom are taking part in the normally low-profile domestic tournament.

It is the first high-level women's golf to be played since the US-based LPGA suspended its season in February, and with sports fans around the world starved of live action rights have been sold to broadcasters in countries including the US, Canada and Australia.

"Interest is very high since this is the first golf tour in the world amid the pandemic," the KLPGA said in a statement.

World number three and double major winner Park Sung-hyun, sixth-ranked Kim Seiyong — a nine-time winner on the LPGA Tour — and number 10 Lee Jeong-eun are part of a 150-strong field chasing the \$180,000 winner's cheque from a tournament purse of \$2.5 million, the highest in the event's 42-year history.

Players are advised to keep two metres apart on the course and minimise physical contact, while touching the pin without gloves is

prohibited.

They have to wear masks before and after their rounds, but can choose whether or not to do so during play, with most deciding to remain uncovered Thursday.

But with no spectators the course was devoid of oohs and aahs, or even applause, yesterday.

Playing without fans was a "pity", the sixth-ranked Kim said after her pre-tournament practice. "Usually a lot of fans show up, more here in Korea than in the US," she said. "But I'm thankful for just even being able to play."

Apart from the host broadcaster, media coverage on the course is restricted to the first and 10th tees, with personnel required to wear face masks throughout.

Everyone entering the course had their temperature checked and had to provide their personal information. And players have to eat their meals alone to maintain social distancing, with no caddies or family members allowed to sit at the same table in the lounge.

"At lunch all the golfers had to face the same direction while eating" without chatting, Park Sung-hyun said Wednesday. "All of this was quite new." The tournament comes after South Korea — which endured one of the worst early outbreaks of the disease outside mainland China but has brought it under control with a widespread "trace, test and treat" programme — saw professional football and baseball resume last week, also behind closed doors.

Only four LPGA Tour events have been completed this year — the last in Adelaide on Feb-



**SEOUL:** South Korean golfer Park Sung-hyun tees off in the first hole during the first round of the 42nd KLPGA Championship at Lakewood Country Club in Yangju, northeast of Seoul, yesterday. — AFP

ruary 16 — and the tour has outlined plans to resume in mid-July in Michigan.

The men's US PGA Tour, which came to a juddering halt when the Players Championship

was abandoned after the first round in March, has pencilled in a restart behind closed doors at the Charles Schwab Challenge beginning June 11 at Fort Worth, Texas. — AFP

## Osaka using lockdown to conquer inner demons

**TOKYO:** Two-times Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka is using the novel coronavirus shutdown as one of self reflection to try and overcome her crippling shyness. The tennis season was suspended in early March due to the COVID-19 outbreak, and the hiatus will continue until at least mid-July with many countries in lockdown to contain the virus.

Japan's Osaka, who trains in the United States, the country worst affected by the flu-like virus with over 1.4 million infections and more than 83,000 deaths, is taking advantage of the extended break to do some soul searching.

"I think people know me as being really shy... I want to take the quarantine time to just think about everything, and for me, I have a lot of regrets before I go to sleep," Osaka told CNN Sport.

Petra Kvitova said last year Osaka would have to get used to having a target on her back after the Japanese

said she struggled to deal with increased scrutiny in the wake of her rise to the top of the world rankings.

"Most of the regrets are because I don't speak out about what I'm thinking. I feel like if I asserted myself, I would have gotten the opportunity to see what would have happened," Osaka said.

Osaka, who became the first Japanese player to attain the world number one ranking following her 2019 Australian Open victory, believes tennis is not a top priority at the moment.

"I want to take this time to learn something new because I'm pretty sure I won't have this much free time ever again. It's not like I'll forget how to play tennis," the world number 10 added.

With no access to gyms and tennis courts, the 22-year-old found a training partner in former world number one Venus Williams, with the two sharing a workout session on social media.

"I don't want to train five hours a day right now because I think that's how you get burned out and you never know when tournaments will start again," Osaka said.

"I did an Instagram live with Venus just now. It was kind of more intense than I thought it was going to be. "For some reason I thought we were going to be stretching, but yeah, we were doing a bit of movement drills and then lunges and stuff." — Reuters

## Bittersweet Savea to leave Toulon rugby, eyes N Zealand return

**WELLINGTON:** Ex-All Blacks winger Julian Savea has announced his departure from Toulon, saying he plans to return to club rugby back home in New Zealand. "Thank you to those who have supported me over the past two seasons here at RCT," he said, referring to the star-studded club's French initials.

"I will forever be thankful for this experience and my time in Toulon." With the French season cut short by the coronavirus, Savea — who won 54 caps for New Zealand — said in an interview posted on his Instagram account that he would be "trying to get back into New Zealand rugby or find another contract".

"Very bittersweet moment not getting to end the season the way I wanted to, but also very excited for this next journey ahead of me," he said in a post on Wednesday. He acknowledged the process may take five or six months given restrictions on travel. "I want to thank all my brothers that I've played with over the past two seasons, you guys are very special to me and I've made some life-long friendships I will cherish forever." Savea previously played for the Hurricanes Super Rugby side, in his native Wellington. His announcement came as World Cup-winning winger Nehe Milner-Skudder revealed that he would play for Otago Highlanders in New Zealand's domestic Super Rugby competition rather than take up a planned three-year contract with Toulon. — AFP