

# Asian golf makes possible American Hamilton's rags-to-riches story

By BRAD EWART  
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In less than two seasons, American professional golfer Todd Hamilton's career has gone from rags to riches.

Hamilton was almost broke when he left home in January of last year to play the Asian PGA Tour. His sponsors had given him enough money to play three months on the Asian circuit. After that their support would end.

"I had not been playing all that well for my first four years as a professional. I hadn't won a tournament. I wasn't making much money and the future did not look good."

Hamilton worked painstakingly on his game during the cold winter months at his

home course in Oquawka, Ill. With the temperature well below freezing and the wind-chill numbing his face and hands, Hamilton hit thousands of balls off the frozen turf preparing himself for one last chance on the Asian Tour.

When he arrived in Asia his fortunes changed. During the three-month Asian PGA Tour Hamilton won the Singapore Rolex Masters, the Korean Open and finished in the top 10 in six out of nine tournaments. For his outstanding efforts he also claimed the Asian Tour Order-of-Merit.

"I called my wife Jackie after winning in Korea and said 'Jack, we're rich.'"

Hamilton's earnings in Asia, including bonuses, was more than \$170,000. He also

gained a one-year exemption to play the JPGA Tour. In Japan he won the '92 Maruman Open and finished 13th in the JPGA money ranking. In total last season Hamilton earned over \$800,000.

Not bad for a golfer who left home not knowing what the future had in store for him. At the end of June on this year's JPGA Tour Hamilton had earned another \$63,286,411 and was third on the money list.

Of course the tax man takes his share but Hamilton has now earned over \$1.4 million in the past 17 months.

"We went from the poor house to the big house," explained Hamilton, who along with his wife is now building their dream home in Texas.

"Here I was with very little money. If I didn't do well I was probably going to have to find something else to do. Or find somebody else to kick in some money."

## Scholarship-caliber player

Hamilton comes from a small farming town about four hours southwest of Chicago, Ill. His parents have pictures of him swinging a golf club at three years of age and he started playing golf tournaments when he was 10.

He played well enough as a junior to earn a scholarship to the University of Oklahoma. Hamilton's college teammates included current U.S. PGA Tour regulars Grant Waite, Andrew Magee and European tour player Greg

Turner. Other rival collegiate players included Scott Verplank, Jeff Maggert and Billy Mayfair.

"I thought when I turned professional that everything was going to come easy," said Hamilton, who won four college tournaments. "I was going to qualify for the U.S. Tour. Make a lot of cash. Get the nice house and car. None of that happened."

Fresh out of university in 1987, Hamilton came within three strokes of qualifying for the U.S. PGA Tour. He then failed to qualify for the Canadian tour and was forced to play in state opens and minor minitour events. In January of 1988 he ventured out onto the Asian Tour.

"In Asia I was kind of shell-

shocked. I came from a small town of about 1,500 people and I really didn't know what to expect. We went to cities like Bangkok, Calcutta, Hong Kong and Taiwan where there were so many people and living conditions I could never have imagined."

Not only was it culture shock for the son of a country grocery store owner, but the golf courses and competition were tougher than he expected.

Hamilton was not only learning the demanding skills of his profession — he was maturing as a touring professional and as an individual. Todd was growing up.

"I guess I thought everything was going to be handed to me and that never really

happened. It took awhile but I learned that if you want to go anywhere in professional golf you had better work at it. Asia showed me just how true that is."

Prior to his success of last season Hamilton's best pro finish had been on the Canadian Tour in 1990 when he lost in a playoff for the Victoria Open. After winning numerous junior and college tournaments, he couldn't "get over the hump" and win in professional golf.

## Mired in minor leagues

Hamilton tried and failed in five attempts at qualifying for the U.S. PGA Tour. While his college peers were beginning to find success on the Gold

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TODD HAMILTON waves to fans at the 18th green at the Seve Ballesteros Golf Club course Sunday. BY KYODO PHOTO

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Trail, Hamilton was struggling in the minor leagues.

"Maybe in life when you don't expect much of yourself — that's when things happen."

He arrived in Manila a week before the tour's first official tournament and played in the Philippine Masters. Hamilton's off-season practice began to show dividends and he finished second. The following week he got off to a good start on the Asian tour with a fifth-place finish in the Philippine Open.

Things were beginning to fall into place. The putts were finding the hole instead of lipping out. Hamilton's confidence was gaining momentum. He was playing well.

It all came together in Singapore at the Rolex Masters, where Hamilton ended five years of frustration and won his first title as a pro. The top prize of \$13,000 helped pay some of the expensive travel bills while getting the sponsors off his back.

He was also learning how to win.

Week after week through-

out the Asian tour, Hamilton continued to play well, consistently finishing in the top 10 and banking a check every week. In Korea, the second-to-last stop on the grueling circuit, he was in a battle with Taiwan's Hsieh Chin-Hseng for the coveted Order-of-Merit title.

The circuit money winner would receive a one-year exemption on the JPGA Tour, an invitation to both the British Open, Nicklaus' Memorial tournament and a \$37,000 bonus.

"The win in Korea was really satisfying because it meant so much. There was no way Hsieh could catch me in the Order-of-Merit race. I had finally won a tournament on a recognized world tour and I would be exempt in Japan for at least a year. The money was pretty good too."

Hamilton had come a long way from stocking groceries in his father's store in Oquawka. He was now in the big leagues. Winning breeds winning and Hamilton now had the chance to apply his newly acquired knowledge to the lucrative Japanese tour.

After 12 consecutive weeks of tourney play in Asia, Hamilton needed a rest. He went home to celebrate his newfound success with his family and friends. After a few weeks of home cooking, Hamilton and his wife packed their suitcases and headed back out on tour. He missed the cut in both Jack Nicklaus' Memorial tournament and the British Open, but bounced back to finish sixth in the Canadian TPC.

"I was anxious to get back to Japan. I was playing well and really felt like something was going to happen."

In his second week back in Japan Hamilton carded a 7-under-par 65 in the first round of the Maruman Open. He added rounds of 67 and 67 for a one-stroke lead over Frankie Minoza heading into the final round.

"It looked like it was going to be Frankie and me on the last day unless somebody really got hot," he recalled.

That somebody was Jumbo Ozaki. Jumbo trailed Hamilton by seven strokes starting out the final round and really didn't look like too much of a

threat. But then, Jumbo is Jumbo, and at times the man is not merely mortal. He knows he's good and so does everybody else in the tournament.

When Jumbo's drives start taking off like a 747 and his iron shots search out the flag like radar, when the putts start to drop and he pumps his fist in the air with a smirk on his face, then look out. The "Golf King" of Japan is on a tear.

It doesn't matter how many shots he trails the leader by. Jumbo knows how to win. He won half of his 79 tournaments in Japan by merely frightening his opponents into submission. He's like a heavyweight fighter in the ring against a flyweight. No contest!

"You can't help but think about Jumbo," explained Hamilton. "Not only that, he was playing in the group in front of us and we could see what he was doing."

Coming up to the 72nd hole Hamilton had managed to hang onto a two-stroke lead over Ozaki. The final hole was a long par-5 with the green guarded by sand and water.

Hamilton played safe by laying up on his second shot.

"While I was waiting for Jumbo's group to finish out I heard a man in the gallery say 'Jumbo par.' I knew that I had a two-stroke lead and could win with bogey."

## Setting realistic goals

Hamilton wedged his third shot onto the green and then three-putted to edge Jumbo by one stroke. He had now won for the third time in six months.

"Knowing that I could come through with everything on the line and win on a major tour, plus holding up under the pressure of Jumbo, was really satisfying," he said.

Hamilton continued to play well in Japan for the rest of the season. He had nine top-10 finishes and in the second-to-last tournament of the season finished one stroke behind T.M. Chen in the Japan Series.

"It all happened so fast. And it happened the way I pictured it would happen, only it took a lot longer than I thought it would. I've learned now that when you think you

have this game licked — you don't."

Hamilton has already achieved one of his goals for this season and that came with a recent win at the Acom International. His second goal is to finish in the top-10 on the money ranking list. He wants to play another full season in '94 on the Japan PGA Tour and then possibly try again to play the U.S. Tour.

"I now try not to make my goals too high. That's what I did when I first started out in professional golf. I made them too high and it was just too hard to realize them. If a person can make their goals within their reach and work really hard, they can get there," he said.

"My ultimate goal is to get to the U.S. PGA Tour. I think that's where the best competition is and I would like to see how my game stacks up against them."

Todd Hamilton is one golfer who has proven that patience, perseverance and a lot of hard work pay off. More golfers fail than those who succeed in professional golf. Hamilton is one of the wealthier survivors.