

Aussie Mackay links his fortune to Japan

Former geologist becomes a millionaire on Japanese golf circuit

By BRAD EWART
Special to The Japan Times

Roger Mackay made a million-dollar decision when he decided to give up hunting for rocks and play golf for a living.

Eight years ago Mackay reached a crucial point in his life. He was an unemployed geologist, recently married and couldn't decide if he should pursue a career in geology or become a professional golfer.

"It wasn't an easy decision," explained Mackay, who graduated from university with a degree in geology. "I had a family, I was a qualified geologist and had a fair career as an amateur. I knew how difficult it could be to make a living playing golf."

For a over a year Mackay climbed the mountains and combed the deserts of Australia in search of precious metals and oil. Then the economy went bad and for more than a year he was out of work.

"That's when I decided to turn pro. I suppose playing golf for a living sure beats being a rock doctor," said Mackay, who this year earned ¥113,137,135 (\$877,000) on the JPGA Tour.

In Australian dollars that equates to more than \$1.2 million for the year. That doesn't include bonuses from his sponsors, Dunlop and Pocari Sweat.

"It feels pretty good," said Mackay, when asked how it feels to be a millionaire. "The pleasure you get out of playing well and winning is what it's really all about. The money part of it is fortunate. It secures my family and allows me to continue with my golf career."

Heading into the final two tournaments of the '91 JPGA Tour Mackay was leading the money list. However, a win in the Japan Series by Naomich "Joe" Ozaki and an 8th place finish for Mackay dropped the 35-year-old Australian into second place on the money



Roger Mackay

During the Japan Series tournament a nagging back injury hampered his play and forced him to withdraw from the Daikyo Open. All but eliminating any chance of claiming the overall money title.

"It really would have meant a lot to me if I had won the JPGA money ranking," explained Mackay. "But unfortunately I had to withdraw because of my back and I wouldn't have been able to play even if I had tried."

Mackay's back problems forced him to withdraw from a tournament earlier this season and two other times in the past on the JPGA Tour. "I set a goal for myself at the start of the year to finish in the top-10 on the money list. It's been a fantastic year and I can hardly be disappointed now that I have exceeded that goal."

Mackay began the year with two top-five finishes before winning the Dunlop Open in April. The following week he finished second, one stroke behind Severiano Ballesteros at the Chunichi Crowns. In June he won the Mizuno Open and the Visa Taiheiyo Masters in November. This season he posted 10 top-10 finishes out of 22 tournaments.

The Aussie has now won five times since coming to the JPGA Tour in 1988. In four seasons his career earnings in Japan total ¥188,967,807

(\$1.46 million). Not too bad for a guy who almost became a "rock doctor."

"I have no desire to play any other tour than here in Japan," explained Mackay. "I enjoy playing here and I get along well with the Japanese players. The tournaments are well run and the golf courses suit my game."

"To win here in Japan you have to play as well as anywhere else in the world. There are a lot of good players in Japan and throughout the year many foreigners come here to play."

The list of foreign players who competed on the JPGA Tour this year is like the who's who in golf. The No.1 ranked player in the world, Ian Woosnam, heads this list of great golfers. Also included was Severiano Ballesteros, Greg Norman, Nick Faldo, Tom Watson and Raymond Floyd.

Add to that list the top Japanese professionals such as Isao Aoki, the three Ozaki brothers Jumbo, Joe and Jet, Tommy Nakajima and you have a formidable field every week.

The first Australian player to compete in Japan was five-time British Open champion Peter Thomson. For 20 years Graham Marsh has been a dominant player in Japan along with countrymen Brian Jones and Terry Gale. Another Australian plying his trade here in Japan is second-year

JPGA professional Anthony Gilligan.

His first three years as a professional were not unlike many young golfers. Without a sponsor he had to pay his own way around the Australian and Asian circuits.

"Unless you are very fortunate, in the beginning as a professional it's always a struggle. I paid my own way and lived on very little money. You've got to work hard at it 'cause if you don't — you go broke."

Mackay's first pro win came in 1985 in a small tournament on the South Pacific Circuit. In 1987 he won the Australian PGA and the Victoria Open to finish second on their Order-of-Merit.

The victory in the Australian PGA and some prompting from Marsh and Jones with the Dunlop Company enabled Mackay to gain 10 sponsors exemptions onto the JPGA tour in 1988. That year he finished among the top-60 money winners to gain a berth as a seeded player in 1989.

Mackay hasn't looked back since.

"I have no desire to play in the USA or on the European Tour. I like it here in Japan and it's only a 10-hour flight back to Australia," said Mackay.

As often as his hectic schedule allows Mackay goes back to his home in Perth to be with his wife Roslyn and their

children Brendan and Ellie. Occasionally Roslyn accompanies her husband on the tour and when she has to be home with the children he says "the phone bill gets rather large."

About the future players on the JPGA Tour, Mackay agrees that Ryoken Kawagishi will be the next Japanese superstar. He also admires the talent of Yoshinori Kaneko, Harumitsu Hamano, Satoshi Higashi and Tetsu Nishikawa.

"These will be the future stars in Japan after Aoki and Nakajima," predicted Mackay. "But I also think the more younger Japanese players they can get out on the tour, the better it will be for the game here."

The top-three courses on Mackay's list in Japan are the Taiheiyo Club Gotemba Course, Ibaraki G.C., the Phoenix C.C. and Sodegaura G.C.

"My future is here in Japan. This winter I'm going to hire a tutor to help me with my understanding of the Japanese language and maybe I'll even begin to like sushi. You can forget about natto. I'll never be able to eat that stuff."

Mackay's quiet demeanor and dedicated approach to the game is suited to the Japanese way. To quote a phrase from another sport "if you've gotta have wa" then he has it.

Some succeed in the game of golf while many fail. Roger Mackay is one of the fortunate few who has made it to the top of his profession. He's the man from Down Under who gave up being a rock doctor to be a golfing millionaire.