

PARAGUAYAN DENIES HUMBLE ORIGINS TO BECOME ASIAN CHAMPION

Franco makes his mark on Asian Tour

By BRAD EWART

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If they made a movie about Carlos Franco's emergence into the golfing world they could call it "The Natural."

Hollywood producers are not knocking on the door of this "new face" in golf but the script has all the ingredients of a best seller.

It begins with Carlos, who is the son of a greenskeeper and one of six brothers in a golfing family. Without instruction or television to watch how the world's best play the game, young Franco learns golf by just picking up a club and hitting the ball.

Carlos was a natural talent in a game where the modern day golfer's swing is manufactured on the lesson tee.

Three years ago he was an unknown toiling on the South American Tour. Today he is the Asian Tour's Order of Merit champion with a one-year exemption to play the lucrative JPGA Tour. This summer he will play in Jack Nicklaus' Memorial tournament, the British Open in Scotland and a full schedule in Japan.

Roundabout route

Franco's journey takes him from the jungles of Paraguay to the skyscrapers of Japan with stops along the way in Scotland, Hong Kong, Singapore and India. He has matched his game against the world's best and has proven he belongs.

The star of the movie could be Charles Bronson because at a glance Franco resembles this Hollywood "tough guy." The problem is that Bronson could never emulate the smooth-flowing, powerful swing that Franco puts on every shot. Franco also putts like a magician and his short game is immaculate.

A good movie needs drama and heart-tugging emotion. The Carlos Franco Story begins in the most obscure of golfing locations — the Asuncion Golf Club in Paraguay. The Francos' home was next to the golf course where the family eked out a living. His father was the greenskeeper and his brothers were all caddies.

On a swing and a prayer

Every day young Carlos would follow his brothers onto the course. With their cast-away clubs and scarred golf balls he developed a golf swing. Not that his family couldn't afford a television set — 20 years ago there was no television in Paraguay.

There was also no golf instruction manuals and no teacher to show you the finer points of the swing. In fact there are only three golf courses and 200 golfers in Paraguay. Soccer is the game of choice in a country of roughly 4.5 million people.

"I watch my brothers and I learn to swing by myself. My oldest brother Sebastian showed me the grip and from there I was on my own," explained Franco, 29, with the assistance of an interpreter. "My English no good. So sorry."

In South America there are two distinct class levels. You are either rich or you are poor. What that means is if you come from "the other side of the tracks," the closest you will get to professional golf is probably as a caddy. Your education is how to survive and make a living with little emphasis on the three R's and no hope of going to college.

Sibling rivalry

As a young boy, nobody explained to Carlos Franco these unfair class rules that are a cruel reality of life. His only ambition was to be the best golfer in his family. Little did he know then where the sibling rivalry would take him today.

All six brothers and two cousins are now golf professionals. Angel, the second-oldest brother, won a Nike Tour and a Canadian PGA Tour event in 1993. Last year Carlos teamed with his brother Angel and Raul Fretes to lead Paraguay in an upset 2-1 victory over Scotland in the first round of the Dunhill Cup at St. Andrews.

In 1993, Carlos won the fledgling South American Tour Order of Merit, which gained him an exemption onto the Asian Tour.

"Carlos was a little bit afraid to come to Asia but I insist him to go," explained Fretes, who also finished a

very respectable 32nd in the Asian Tour rankings. "I said, 'You have to go and try. You are a good player and can win.'"

Carlos had never taken his game seriously and prefers fishing to practice. Often he wouldn't touch a club for a month at a time and then would come back to golf and shoot subpar scores. He has a wife and two kids in Paraguay and doesn't like being away from home more than a couple of weeks at a time.

At the Philippine Open, the opening leg of the Asian Tour, Franco proved his friend Fretes was right by defeating South Korean Choi Sang Ho in a sudden-death playoff. He picked up a check for \$50,000 and a Mitsubishi automobile worth another \$20,000.

Franco notched only one Asian tour victory but followed up with third place finishes in India, Thailand and the Sabah Masters in Malaysia. He also finished sixth in the Malaysian Open, 10th in Hong Kong and only failed to make one cut, in Korea. Franco collected a total of 827 points to finish well ahead of American Brandt Jobe with 708 points and Canada's Jim Rutledge with 686.

Showing the way

"I'm very proud to have finished No. 1. It is good for the players of South America because they now know that they can do what I have done. I've never won this much money and I have to thank John Benda and Steve Cook on the Asian Tour for all of their help."

The four previous Asian Tour champions, Brian



Carlos Franco
BRAD EWART PHOTO

Watts, Todd Hamilton, Rick Gibson and Frankie Minoza, all won a tournament in Japan during their one-year JPGA Tour exemption. They now are all regular players and contenders on the Japanese tour. Franco has the ingredients in his game to do the same thing.

"I have a lot of confidence in myself and I think I can win here in Japan. In the past I hadn't taken my golf that seriously but now I'm going to change. The past three months I worked very hard to get into this position and I will keep working harder now."

In professional golf there are no class restrictions. It doesn't matter where you come from, how you learned the game or how much money your family has. If you play the best golf and shoot the lowest scores, you win!

They may never make a movie about Carlos Franco, the prizewinner from Paraguay who found fame in Asia. If they do the producers should wait another year to see what he'll do in Japan.

The JPGA Tour may prove to be a stepping stone to bigger things in golf for Franco — a man who knows no limits.

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