

People

Feng Shanshan's driving ambition

WORLD-CLASS GOLFER FROM GUANGZHOU IS COMMITTED TO PROMOTING THE UNDERDEVELOPED GAME AT HOME

By SUN XIAOCHEN

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When Feng Shanshan speaks about the stuffed toys in her carry-on bags and the South Korean TV dramas she enjoys watching during long flights, her high spirits seemed no different from those of any other young woman.

However, this "girl next door" is a trailblazer. She claimed the Chinese mainland's first major golf championship in 2012, and has driven the game's rise in the world's most-populous country, a huge achievement for the 25-year-old.

Feng started playing on the US-based Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) Tour in 2008 and became a household name in global golfing circles after she won the Wegmans LPGA Championship in 2012, one of the five major titles, to become the first person from the Chinese mainland to do so.

Since then, her consistent performances on the tour — highlighted by three LPGA titles and a recent runner-up spot at another major event, the Ricoh Women's British Open — coupled with the huge, untapped market in China, have cemented her status as an Asian golfing icon.

However, Feng does not enjoy the sort of stardom accorded to tennis player Li Na who won the 2011 French Open, becoming the first Chinese to win a Grand Slam.

Feng's 2012 major victory was not celebrated domestically in the way Li's was, and most people fail to identify her when she walks around the crowded streets of Guangzhou, her hometown in South China's Guangdong province.

Citing golf's underdevelopment in China, Feng shrugs off her low-profile status but is still committed to promoting the game in her home country.

"Golf in China remains a less-popular sport compared with other mainstream events. I feel blessed and responsible to be in a position (as the nation's top golfer) to represent it and I will do what it takes to help it grow," Feng said, speaking after the launch of the Beijing-born Reignwood LPGA Classic in July.

Feng currently ranks No 8 in the world and has bagged career earnings of more than \$4.7 million on the tour.

Her career began its rise 15 years ago. Inspired by her father, Feng Xiong, a cofounder of the Guangzhou Golf Association, Feng



Chinese golfer Feng Shanshan competes for the Mission Hills Star Trophy in Haikou, Hainan province, in March.

SHI YAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

started to learn the fundamentals of golf at age 10, when the game was still an expensive sport that was only played by China's wealthy elite.

Still, the lack of advanced training resources and a golf culture slowed her progress even after she had won three consecutive China Amateur Tournaments (2004-06) and began to dominate the domestic game.

To improve her career prospects, at the age of 17, Feng was sent to the United States to train at the academy of renowned golf coach Gary Gilchrist, who also works with former world No 1 and five-time major winner Yani Tseng of Taiwan.

The demanding training and study schedules, the challenges of living independently outside her comfort zone, and the language barrier were too much for Feng, who struggled badly in the first three months.

"I had to abandon all I knew about the game (because of the different training philosophy) and didn't hope to make any



friends at all," Feng says of the tough transition period.

Despite winning a scholarship to Gilchrist's academy in Florida, living expenses, tuition at a nearby high school and travel costs became

heavy financial burdens on her parents, who both work at governmental institutes.

By the end of 2007, when Feng's parents had spent almost all of their savings to support their daughter, they even considered mortgaging their house.

"We felt that if our child couldn't continue doing what she's good at because her family couldn't afford it, it would be a dereliction of duty," says Feng's mother, Zheng Yuyan.

However, all the hard work and family support finally paid off in December 2007 when Feng, who was still an amateur, earned a spot on the LPGA Tour's 2008 season after tying for ninth place at the tour's qualifying tournament.

Making the tour turned Feng from an amateur into a professional, with opportunities to win decent purses and lucrative endorsement deals, a breakthrough equal to that of basketball star Yao Ming when he was drafted by the NBA in 2002.

"This has been a dream of Jenny's for so long," says Gilchrist, referring to Feng by her English name. "She had so much courage coming over

when she was 17, not being able to speak much English. She's had her battles and her struggles coming up."

The rest of the story developed in a rewarding way as Feng gradually picked up her game on the tour en route to winning her first title at the LPGA Championship in 2012, finishing second at the Reignwood LPGA Classic and third at the season-ending CME Group Titleholders last year.

Now, she has joined the likes of Tseng and South Korea's four-time major winner Park In-bee to become a strong Asian presence on the LPGA Tour and inspire her fellow countrywomen.

Zhang Xiaoning, vice-president of the China Golf Association, hails Feng's overseas training approach as "an ideal model for the rest of China's young hopefuls to emulate".

Despite her success, Feng remains modest. "My path of going to the West might not fit everybody," she said. "But, at least, I've proved that a Chinese player can succeed in the Western-dominated sport of golf."