

'Bashful Prince' shouldn't be among golf game's royalty

by Various Sports Writers

In The 2007 Callaway Junior World Golf Championships, South African Dylan Frittelli won the Boys 15-17 Division with an impressive performance on the demanding South Course at Torrey Pines. He shot 70-70-69-74 to blow away the field and win by five shots over the next-best golfer, Danny Lee.

Ryo Ishikawa, a 15-year-old from Japan, was in the field that week, but hardly was a factor, other than creating a media frenzy.

The so-called "Bashful Prince" had won a Japan Tour event two months earlier, but against some of the world's best juniors he was overmatched at Torrey Pines. Ishikawa couldn't score par in any of his four rounds, twice carded 76 and finished alone in 23rd, 16 shots behind Frittelli.

Maybe he just had a bad week. Sixteen shots over four rounds, though, is a whipping.

So guess who's making his PGA Tour debut this week on one of America's greatest golf courses, Riviera Country Club.

Look who's playing two more events on sponsors' exemptions when the tour swings to Florida next month.

Consider who is playing "this is painful even to type" in the Masters in April.

Imagine who the No. 67-ranked player in the world is.

Not Frittelli, who is doing so well as a freshman at Texas that he was named the Big 12 Conference's Golfer of the Month for November.

It would be Ishikawa, now a 17-year-old professional whose success on the minor-league Japan Tour, followed by his ridiculous rise in the badly flawed World Golf Rankings, has put him in position to garner invitations from even the leaders at Augusta National Golf Club.

What a joke.

When will golf learn? How many more Ty Tryons and Michelle Wies and Tadd Fujikawas do we have to endure before people get a grip on the fact this game is monumentally difficult at the professional level, and that it takes more than stringing a few good rounds together to make a career of it.

When will sponsors and endorsers and tournament directors cease at abetting these misguided kids and their greedy parents from going down such a twisted path?

And when will everybody agree that 99 percent of the teenagers who try to play for cash have the same odds of excelling as a kindergartener in calculus class?

Ishikawa was introduced to the American golf media Tuesday in a news conference at Riviera, where he teed up Thursday in the Northern Trust Open, whose championship is being defended by Phil Mickelson.

Even by L.A. standards, it was a reportorial zoo, not because of the regional outlets that always cover the tournament, but because the Japanese media is frothing over Ishikawa, who drew more than 40 reporters and photographers for his Junior World appearance.

Around 400 media members are on hand this week, and, according to tournament PR man Toby Zwickel, the media center has been expanded by 33 percent to accommodate the crush.

This, for a kid who has a better chance of meeting Julia Roberts on Hollywood Boulevard than he does of winning the NTO.

I hate to blame it on Ryo. I have nothing personally against him. He seemed like a nice kid when I interviewed him in July 2007. I didn't find him to be bashful, only polite, humble and soft-spoken. But even back then, he clearly didn't grasp the weight and responsibility of the fervor he had caused.

When he shot a 75 in the first round at Torrey, Ishikawa signed his scorecard and bolted toward his room at the adjacent Hilton, leaving the media to wait a couple of hours for a 20-second sound bite while he took a nap.

"He's very depressed and surprised," explained his handler from the Japan Golf Association.

Upon hearing the story recently, one clever scribe friend produced a new nickname: The Dashful Prince.

Twenty months removed from Junior World, Ishikawa no doubt has matured. He turned pro for the 2008 Japan Tour season and won his second tournament last fall. But that doesn't come close to making him ready to compete on the PGA Tour.

The Japan Tour is Double-A pro golf, at best. Ishikawa had a 70.89 scoring average in 24 events last year, and that led to a win, seven top-5 finishes and sixth place on the money list.

If Ishikawa played on the PGA Tour last season, the same scoring average would have ranked him 96th with journeyman Patrick Sheehan, who had two top-10s and placed 128th in money. That makes Ishikawa a very good golfer, but hardly Masters invitee material.

Most telling: Sheehan is the 388th-ranked player in the world; Ishikawa is 67th. The Japanese has been as high as 60th after not rating in the top 300 a year ago.

My limited grasp of math and nonsensical mumbo jumbo doesn't allow me to get my arms around the World Golf Rankings any better than the BCS, but I know this: If Ishikawa is the 67th-best player in the world, I've still got hope to win the U.S. Open.

Ishikawa is only five spots behind Pat Perez in the rankings, and Perez won the Bob Hope this year. Among the players closely trailing Ishikawa: David Toms, Chad Campbell, Darren Clarke and Brandt Snedeker.

The rankings are broken. They can't discern Kobe beef from an Oscar Mayer wiener.

All this wouldn't be overly bothersome, except the rankings have real-world effects. Ishikawa nearly got into next week's 64-man field in the Accenture Match Play Championship. The rankings also have legitimized his inclusion in the three PGA Tour tournaments and Masters.

The tour events are inviting Ishikawa in a grab for easy publicity. The Masters, I just can't figure. The Green Jackets want to be global, but they've sold Bobby Jones' soul on this one.

Something tells me Mr. Jones, the greatest amateur of all time, wouldn't be overly impressed with a 17-year-old pop star with a thin resume.

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