

BY REBECCA MACDONALD

CATCH THE FEVER

Women's golf is making headlines like never before. Don't miss the excitement as golf's up-and-coming superstars compete with seasoned talent at the U.S. Women's Open



BIRDIE KIM

This year is shaping up to be one of the most exciting ever for professional women's golf, and the U.S. Women's Open championship promises to be the place where it all comes together in an electrifying competition that will pit the raw talent, drive and determination of golf's newest superstars-in-the-making against the LPGA's more seasoned players.

The U.S. Women's Open is open to both women professionals and amateurs. In 1953, when the tournament was first added to the USGA's roster of championships, the tournament attracted only 37 contestants. This year, more than 100,000 fans are expected to converge upon Newport, Rhode Island to cheer on their favorite players amid a field of 156 players.

The fact that there are several players in the spotlight this year is a testament to how far women's golf has come in attracting attention and corporate sponsors, which include heavy hitters such as American Express, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Honda, Kraft and a host of others. "It's one of the nice things about this event. They want to play here. They all want to win this title," says U.S. Open volunteer coordinator, Cheryl Simon.

There is no shortage of talent on the professional tour, and it's difficult to predict a winner. Last year, Birdie Kim astonished fans when she holed a bunker shot on the 18th hole of the final round to

ANNIKA SORENSTAM



win the tournament. Following is a list of just a few of the top players to watch as they compete for the coveted title of U.S. Open Champion.

The Teen Sensations

Paula Creamer: Self-dubbed the "Pink Panther" after the color that has become her signature (including the grips and shafts of her clubs) the 19-year-old Creamer is no shrinking violet. Named the Louise Suggs Rolex Rookie of the Year award in 2005, she is ranked one of the top three golfers in the world, along with Annika Sorenstam and Michelle Wie.* As an amateur, she racked up five top-20 LPGA finishes, playing on sponsor's exemptions. After tying for top amateur with Michelle Wie at the 2004 U.S. Women's Open, she headed to the LPGA's Tour Qualifying School, where she won by five strokes, at 18 the youngest player ever to win the grueling event. In her rookie year as a professional, she added ten top-10 finishes and two wins to her record, and became the youngest player and first tour rookie to make the U.S. Solheim Cup team.

Morgan Pressel: The 18-year-old, who took second in last year's U.S. Women's Open, first qualified for the event in 2001, when she was still in seventh grade. Last year, 23-year-old Birdie Kim narrowly defeated Pressel in the Women's Open when she holed her bunker shot on the 72nd hole. Pressel watched from the 18th fairway, tied with

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Kim, as the ball disappeared into the hole, edging her out of a playoff. Despite her age, Pressel has a fierce competitive spirit and the game to match. At 17, she petitioned the LPGA to grant her permission to join the tour early, before she reached the 18-year-old age requirement. The LPGA agreed, and she earned exempt status when she tied for sixth place at the LPGA's Tour Qualifying School. This is her rookie season on the professional tour.

Michelle Wie: At 16, she rivals Tiger as the most recognizable face in sports, and is known for her legendary 300-plus yard drives. At press time, Wie was not yet on the roster for the U.S. Women's Open, but few doubt that she'll be in the field when the time comes. No longer an amateur and too young to qualify for the LPGA tour, Wie announced her professional status in October of last year when she signed endorsement deals worth \$10 million from Nike and Sony. At press time, she has yet to win a professional tournament, but Wie just narrowly missed her chance at the Kraft Nabisco Championship this spring when her 10-foot birdie putt caught the left lip of the hole and left her one shot out of a playoff. In July, she'll tee it up against the men for the second time on the PGA Tour at the John Deere Classic.



MORGAN PRESSEL

The Seasoned Winners

Annika Sorenstam, already an LPGA Hall of Famer with 67 wins at the age of 35 and number one in the world golf rankings, is inarguably golf's top female player. In 2005 she won ten LPGA events, and has won once already this year, pushing her career total to 67--third best ever behind **Kathy Whitworth** (88) and **Mickey Wright** (82). She is one of only six LPGA Tour Hall of Famers to have accomplished the Career Grand Slam, win-

JULL INKSTER

Photo: Warren Little / Getty Images



ning each of the designated majors during her playing careers. In 2003, Sorenstam was invited to play in The Colonial golf tournament in Fort Worth, making her the first woman to play in a PGA event since Babe Zaharias, who qualified for the 1945 Los Angeles Open. She has won eight Rolex Player of the Year awards, and is the holder of various all-time scoring records, including the lowest score in a single round (59) and the lowest scoring average for one season (68.70 in 2002). In 2005, Sorenstam received the ESPY Award as Best Female Athlete, and in 2006 she remains atop the list of Women's World Golf Rankings.

Karrie Webb: A two-time winner of the Women's Open, the Australian is coming off a spectacular win in the Kraft Nabisco Championship, her seventh major, where she holed out from 116 yards with a pitching wedge for an eagle on the 18th hole of the final round. Her nine under, two-shot lead edged Michelle Wie out of a playoff and put her in a tie with Lorena Ochoa. A birdie putt on the first playoff hole sealed her win. Webb's resume includes 31 LPGA victories, including seven majors. She was inducted into the LPGA's Hall of Fame last year. After a winless 2005 season, she buckled down and worked with her coach, Ian Triggs, to recover her game. The changes appear to be working, and Webb is in the hunt for more wins this season.

Julie Inkster: At age 45, the one-time player for the Harbor High boys golf team and mother of two is still a viable threat on tour. Her recent win at the Safeway International tournament this spring put her at number eight in the Rolex World Golf Rankings, and marked a comeback that this Hall of Famer would like to continue. It was her first victory in 49 starts, with her last win occurring at the Evian Masters in 2003. But Inkster is no stranger to winning, she's tied with Webb with 31 career victories and seven majors. The tour veter-

an, who is often cited by younger players as a role model, says she's been working on retooling her swing, and is still feeling competitive. "I knew I could win again. I just needed the tools to do it."

*At press time according to Rolex World Golf Rankings.-



PAULA CREAMER