

Daniel Chopra: An Indian footprint on the PGA Tour at last

There is an Indian footprint on the biggest golf tour in the world at last. After Asia, [Europe](#) and Japan, there is an US PGA Tour title that the Indian golf fraternity can lay claim to.

Sure, Daniel Chopra carries a Swedish passport, but there is no denying that the man who cut his teeth at the Delhi Golf Club cares a lot for the Indian tri-colour, which adorns his website, and chicken tikka masala, which he loves and his Australian wife, Samantha, cooks so well.

Chopra, who turns 34 Dec 23, has paid his dues.

A ward of Kel Llewellyn, Chopra turned professional at 19 and went through the paces on various tours - Indian, Asian, European and finally Nationwide and PGA.

There were successes and heartbreaks at every stage, but Chopra stayed the course and Monday he found the sweet rewards with his maiden PGA Tour win in the Ginn sur Mer Classic at Tesoro Club, Florida.

Three weeks ago, he entered the Valero Texas Open on the bubble as far as securing his 2008 card was concerned. A third place before Monday's win did it.

Back in 2001, Chopra was weeks, probably days, away from planning a shift to becoming a teaching pro after coming close to losing the playing rights on various tours.

But he found in Jeev Milkha Singh a close friend who was willing to help him tide through the rough patch with a temporary loan. Jeev did not bat an eyelid and gave him a cheque and, not just that, also put in word for a sponsor's spot into an event in Taiwan.

Chopra did so well that he went on to win the Mercuries Masters. And thus was brilliant golf career saved.

That Chopra has been able to triumph at the highest level, soon after his old buddy Jeev Milkha Singh grabbed four wins on the Asian, European and Japan Tours last year, is indeed sweet since they keep in touch despite playing thousands of miles apart.

'In my book, Danny has always been one of the most talented players I have ever seen. With this win, he has proved that he is among the best,' said Jeev from Spain, where he defends the Volvo Masters of Europe title at Valderrama.

A member of the European Tour from 1996 to 2000, Chopra went back to the Asian Tour after losing his playing rights in Europe. He won in Taiwan in 2001 and so had a card in Asia for 2002.

But he switched to the Nationwide Tour to try and make it in the US and finished 90th on the money list. Nothing sensational.

The following year, he made 16 cuts in a row and finished 21st on the money list with \$178,799, a mere \$1,164 behind Tommy Tolles for the final 2004 PGA Tour card as only the top-20 earned the card for following year.

Undeterred, he went to the qualifying school and finished sixth to make it to the 2004 PGA Tour.

He played the PGA Tour with moderate success in his first year, but he likes playing so much that when he could not get into some big events, he entered some Nationwide Tour events as well.

He won twice in two weeks at First Tee Arkansas Classic and Henrico County Open, shooting a record 30-under in the latter.

He stayed on in top-125 to save his PGA card for 2005 and has stayed in the elite group since.

The year 2006 was his best till now when he made 22 cuts in 33 starts and finished in the top-10 six times including runner-up at the Frys.com Open and won a career-high \$1,530,455.

Now in 2007 he has bettered all those marks.

But what Chopra desperately needed was a win. He came close with a third place at the Valero Texas Open, which also helped him secure his card for 2008.

And now finally after a long, long wait, came the win on his 133rd start.

Chopra was born in Stockholm to an Indian father and Swedish mother. But he came to India at the age of seven and grew up with his grandparents. He won the All-India Junior Golf Championship when he was 14 and also emerged winner at Doug Sanders World Junior Championships.

A keen traveller who maintains up his own website, Chopra also has another lofty claim - that of being the first person to hit a golf ball off the Great Wall of China, in 1995.

Early in his career, Chopra, who was among the first non-caddies to turn pro, travelled around Asia and Europe. He won the Johor Baru Open in Malaysia and the Swedish International Championship in 1993, the Classic Indian Masters, Jamtland Open and Challenge Chargeurs on the European Challenge Tour and the Indian PGA Championship and the Malaysian PGA Championship in 1994.

In 1995, he won the Taiwan Open and six years later, the same place would save his career when he won the Mercuries Masters.

A brilliant shot-maker on his day, Chopra needed a 'PGA winner' tag on his bio-data. Now he has it.

And with it, he can go places and make a mark at the highest levels.

V. Krishnaswamy (© IANS / India eNews)