



GREAT CHALLENGE: Having held his own in a putting contest at The Great Wall, Zhang Lian-wei (right) was among the Asian players who found it tough going against the likes of Colin Montgomerie (centre) in the Johnnie Walker Classic.

Backs Against The Great Wall

Buoyed by their stunning success in the Visa Dynasty Cup, 11 members of the triumphant Asian team headed north from Shenzhen's Mission Hills to Beijing's Pine Valley to contest the Johnnie Walker Classic. The form of the Asian heroes proved as capricious as the weather as they struggled to keep pace with some of the world's leading players. Report by James Spence. Pictures by Getty Images.



According to non-playing captain Hsieh Min-nan, Asia's victorious Visa Dynasty Cup team would be capable of giving the European Ryder Cup side a decent run for their money in a match play contest in the region.

Based on the results at the 14th edition of the Johnnie Walker Classic, however, Hsieh, the architect behind Asia's crushing defeat of a powerful Japanese team one week earlier, may be advised to reconsider.

In the most lucrative tournament on the Asian Tour calendar, Asia's finest

were made to look distinctly second best against their counterparts from the European Tour and Australasian Tour in the tri-sanctioned event.

With the exception of Korean Mo Joong-kyung, the 11 other members of the Asian team were present in Beijing and high on hope when the tournament teed-off near the Badaling mountain range, north of Beijing.

Zhang Lian-wei, having beaten Shigeki Maruyama in the final day's singles at Mission Hills, made some perky pre-tournament statements suggesting

he fancied the scalp of Ernie Els. As if alive to these interesting sub-plots, the pairings for the first two days set up some fascinating head-to-head encounters.

The hottest trio were Adam Scott, Thongchai Jaidee and Sergio Garcia who covered the first round in a combined 16-under, Scott doing most of the heavy lifting with his course record 63.

Two games behind, Liang Wen-chong 'beat' Luke Donald, one-under to one-over. But while Donald, at one stage in danger of missing the cut, rallied to post 67-65 in the second and third

rounds and finished ninth, Liang ended joint 53rd after four consistent, but unspectacular, rounds in the low 70s.

Nevertheless, that was still good enough to place him third among the four Asian team members who survived the half-way cut. He will also have been satisfied to finish three shots better than his mentor Zhang, who faded with a closing 77.

Zhang had played the first two rounds in the company of ex-Ryder Cup player Thomas Bjorn and two-time US Open champion Retief Goosen and did well to keep up with the Dane, even if both of them lagged the mighty South African by 30 yards on most driver holes.

The busiest man of the group was Zhang's caddie whose job it was to discipline a posse of inexperienced Chinese photographers following the top group. In the end, Zhang's opening 73 was one worse than Bjorn, both lagging Goosen's 69.

But the bulk of the Asian contingent lost their way in the second round: Jyoti Randhawa, Mardan Mamat, Thammanoon Srirot and Thaworn Wiratchant's 144 totals were one short of the cut line. Joining them on early flights out of Beijing were Boonchu Ruangkit, Amandeep Johl and Angelo Que.

Aggregating all the relevant scores, including the two rounds of those that missed the cut, the five 2004 European Ryder Cup players (Colin Montgomerie, Donald, Garcia, Paul Casey and Miguel Angel Jimenez) were 36-under-par compared to the one-under of the 11 Dynasty Cup members.

Over the week the course was almost taken apart by the longer hitters and the scores would have been even better but for the breezes and the fast, contoured greens that were grainy in some parts and crusty in others.

The Jack Nicklaus-designed course was not proofed for the longer hitting pros who, for instance, were taking fairway woods on the tee at the par-four 18th to play short of the greenside lake with scarcely a worry of finding the fairway bunker. Even from the back tees, the course was unable to defend itself against some of the game's top power hitters.

Scott, for example, showed no signs of having been disadvantaged by playing

HOW ASIA'S 2005 VISA DYNASTY CUP TEAM MEMBERS FARED

Position	Player (Nationality)	Scores	Total
16=	Thongchai Jaidee (THA)	70-72-64-74	280 (-8)
23=	Prayad Marksang (THA)	68-71-66-77	282 (-6)
53=	Liang Wen-chong (PRC)	71-72-70-73	286 (-2)
63=	Zhang Lian-wei (PRC)	73-68-71-77	289 (+1)

Position	Player (Nationality)	Scores	Total
Missed Cut	Thammanoon Srirot (THA)	73-71	144 (0)
	Mardan Mamat (SIN)	73-71	144 (0)
	Jyoti Randhawa (IND)	71-73	144 (0)
	Thaworn Wiratchant (THA)	75-69	144 (0)
	Boonchu Ruangkit (THA)	74-72	146 (+2)
	Amandeep Johl (IND)	76-72	148 (+4)
	Angelo Que (PHI)	75-77	152 (+8)

HOW EUROPE'S 2004 RYDER CUP TEAM MEMBERS FARED

Position	Player (Nationality)	Scores	Total
6=	Colin Montgomerie (SCO)	68-70-69-69	276 (-12)
9	Luke Donald (ENG)	73-67-65-72	277 (-11)
10=	Sergio Garcia (SPN)	67-71-67-73	278 (-10)
30=	Paul Casey (ENG)	72-68-70-73	283 (-5)
70=	Miguel Angel Jimenez (SPN)	71-71-71-77	290 (+2)

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in the worst of the weather on the first day and, despite four consecutive early starts, overpowered the course, primarily designed for the emergent 'CEO-class' in China.

Given that you had to go down to sixth-placed Montgomerie and ninth-placed Donald to find the first moderate hitters, the finishing positions of Thongchai and Prayad Marksang were credible.

That said, all in all it was a sobering week for Asia's finest as they saw at close quarters the gulf that still exists between them and the game's leading players. "The field was strong, so it was disappointing that we didn't make our presence felt a bit more," confessed Thongchai.

Perhaps a better-defended course would have evened the odds a little in favour of the home Tour players. But the stark truth remains that significant improvement is still required from Asia's players until they can truly claim to be on a par with their European rivals. ♪



LEADING LIGHT: Thongchai Jaidee fared best among the Asian contingent.