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Golf in Taiwan: A Case of Family and Social Influences on Talent Development

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Introduction

Taiwan is a small island of 35,883 km² in East Asia, populated by various ethnic groups, with a Chinese majority, an Aboriginal minority, and a small number of new immigrants, mostly from elsewhere in Asia. Golf was introduced to Taiwan during the Japanese colonization from 1895 to 1945 and became popular following Taiwan's economic boom in the 1980s.

Renowned professional golfers from Taiwan include Hsi-Chuen Lu, Tze-Chung Chen, Chien-Soon Lu, and Ai-Yu Tu. For example, Miss Ai-Yu Tu won the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) Japan Tour seven times between 1982 and 1991. More recently, Chin-Shen Hsieh, Chang-Tin Yeh, Wei-Tze Yeh, and Wen-Ter Lu have won many regional titles on the Asian and European Tours, making the golf world aware that Taiwan does a good job of producing professional golfers.

However, no other Taiwanese golfer has come close to emulating the success of Yani Tseng, who has dominated the international golf arena and rose to become the brightest star in women's golf.



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Yani Tseng



view video:
*Highlights of
Yani Tseng's
year*

In 2011, Yani Tseng became the youngest player to win five major LPGA championships, and was ranked World #1 for 109 consecutive weeks (14 February 2011 - 24 March 2013). Yani's journey to the pinnacle of golf provides an example of how family and social agents can positively influence talent development.

This chapter chronicles how the influence of family and friends has helped her to achieve success and also explores how sport psychology has underpinned her success. We collected data from books, newspapers, magazines, and internet reports, and also interviewed her university golf coach, Professor Ting-Heng Sung, and her first coach, Mr. Kao Bo-Hsiung.



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Her Early Life

Born and raised in northern Taiwan, Yani had a colourful and happy childhood. Her father, Mao-Hsi Tseng, was manager of a petroleum company and the owner of a 5000-member golf ranch. Her mother, Yu-Yun Yang, was a full-time housewife and a part-time golf caddie. Yani's parents had different hobbies, interests, social and educational backgrounds, but they had one thing in common, they were enthusiastic golfers. Mr. Tseng even had the nickname of "King of the Taipei Golf Club," which indicates his own golf prowess.

Before she embraced golf, Yani was an ordinary child. During her kindergarten years she engaged in the usual childhood activities, pretending to be a princess and performing on stage, singing and dancing with other children, playing hide-and-seek, and drawing fabulous pictures. Naturally, she sometimes went to her father's ranch to fool around with golf clubs and balls. As a toddler she held a driver that was taller than her, but even at that age she was swinging at golf balls. When she was 5 years old, her father gave her a #7 wood. She played with that club often, but rarely using a conventional swing. At the age of 6, she joined a children's golf tournament, won nothing, but had a wonderful time with the other children (Wang, 2011).

Although Yani only played golf for fun, her parents were aware of her talent. As she grew, her parents recruited a coach for her, Kao Bo-Hsiung, when Yani was 8 years old. Mr. Kao was a former Taiwanese golf champion. Although he won no international golf tournaments, Mr. Kao was a knowledgeable golfer and an excellent mentor.

He taught Yani a firm stance and a stable swing, but took an unusual approach to training an aspiring international golfer. According to his philosophy, physical fitness is the foundation of golf. He criticized Asian golfers for emphasizing golf techniques and skills but ignoring fundamental physical fitness. He said these golfers may be proficient when they are young because of their good skills, but they will stagnate when they get older.

physical
fitness is the
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When Yani was in elementary school she trained with Mr. Kao for three hours a day. Her daily training schedule included a variety of fitness activities and games. To make physical conditioning fun and playful he sometimes joined in and competed with Yani. Mr. Kao believed that if Yani were equipped with powerful physical fitness it would be easier to integrate golf skills and techniques into her performance on the golf course. After two years of training, Yani became extremely fit and started to outperform her peers. Yani's physical fitness was impressive. For example, once when she lost a friendly bet to Mr. Kao, the cost was 800 push-ups, which Yani completed without complaint.

In terms of skills development, Mr. Kao had a special training program. He taught Yani not only how to master the basic skills of golf, but also how to perform shots with varied angles and trajectories. His view was that a top golfer must be able to overcome unexpected situations on the course. To overcome whatever obstacles occurred, he taught Yani to make a simple swing but produce diverse routes to the green. He analyzed major golf championships in a studio with Yani, asking her to imagine herself competing in such situations and how she would handle them. After the analyses, they moved onto the course to practice. Such analyses, on-course training, plus thousands of repetitions of practice shots, filled Yani's mind with rich content knowledge of golfing skills.



Yani rebelled a bit in Grade 7. One day she skipped regular training and went to a billiard parlour. Mr. Kao caught her there but did not punish her. Instead, he explained the similarities and differences between billiards and golf. He used biomechanical principles to explain how to play both sports. After this explanation he let Yani try to apply the knowledge and she improved quickly in billiards. Later she stealthily enrolled herself in a local tournament and won the title of “*New Rising Star of Billiards*”. Yani's father heard about the story and was very upset, but at the same time he was happy to have such a talented daughter.

While receiving Mr. Kao's instructions and training, Yani enrolled in several youth golf programs offered by local clubs and golf schools abroad. Her father sent Yani to compete in the United States when she was only 12 years of age. Then, at the ages of 14 and 16, she attended the Hills Golf Academy in Queensland, Australia, where she made lots of friends, learned many new skills, and generally improved her golf knowledge. Her father invested much time and money to accompany, care, and travel with Yani, playing a crucial role in the development of her golfing talent.

Parental Influence

Bloom's (1985) talent development model and other sport talent models (e.g., Côté, 1999; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Gould, Diffenbach, & Moffett, 2002) have indicated that talented performers typically need strong support from parents. Yani was no exception. Her achievements were influenced deeply by her parents, especially her father. Her parents not only provided meticulous care, time, and money to support Yani's training and competitions, they also offered emotional support whenever it was needed.



Her father was an energetic, passionate, and outgoing gentleman. He had been an excellent baseball player in elementary school, but because of poor family conditions had not been able to dedicate himself to his sport. Instead, he stopped his education and ran a petroleum business with his older brother, which improved his family's financial position. As Mr. Tseng became wealthier, he began to play golf, winning many prizes at local clubs. Due to his natural hospitality and generosity, he made many friends of high socio-economic status including senior company executives, high-ranking government officials, golf club managers and owners, and elite golfers. These social networks provided Yani with great opportunities for her golfing career.

Mr. Tseng was very perceptive in cultivating Yani. He understood golf and knew that if he wanted Yani to be successful, he had to invest in her financially. He paid high tuition fees to recruit the best golf coaches and

English tutors for Yani. According to Mr. Tseng's philosophy, a good coach saves time in terms of learning, and a good English teacher helps Yani eliminate the language barrier.

"There is no free lunch!" he said. "Paying tuition fees represents your respect for professional expertise. At the same time Yani learned to take responsibility for learning. If everything were free, coaches and teachers may not be so serious when they teach Yani and Yani herself may not be serious about learning either" (Wang, 2011, p. 102).

Yani learned golf quickly from Mr. Kao and learned English efficiently from English tutors. Mr. Tseng said the meaningful investment not only saved time, but also made golf a serious matter for Yani.

In addition to providing Yani with regular training, Mr. Tseng sent Yani to the *Youth Talented-Golfer Program* offered by the Sun-Rise Golf & Country Club in Taiwan, from 1997, when she was 18 years old, until 2002. The youth golf program enhanced Yani's ability in every aspect of golf. In addition, Yani's father planned her future development. He considered domestic training to be just the foundation of Yani's international competitiveness, and so he decided to send her back to the Hill Golf Academy in 2003 and 2005 (each trip costing about US\$7,000). These extra learning opportunities allowed her to become familiar with international environments, developed her language and social skills, and taught her many other things that could not be learned at home.



In 2002, the Taiwanese Golf Association (TGA) organized a pre-Asian Games training camp, and although Yani was not a qualified delegate, her father paid the TGA to allow Yani to have the opportunity to train with the other golfers. In the same year, Yani's father paid her travel expenses so that she could compete in a U.S. youth golf tournament. In 2003 and 2004, Yani's father again paid her travel expenses to allow Yani to compete in the U.S. amateur Public Links championship. In 2004, she defeated the talented youth golfer, Michelle Wei, to win the championship.

In 2008, Yani Won the McDonald's LPGA title, becoming the youngest ever champion.



Credit: Courtesy of Professor Ting-Heng Sung

Yani's father had a clear philosophy regarding the education of children. He valued positive attitudes and lessons learned as much as he valued winning, and desperately wanted Yani to learn life lessons from golf. He took the view that if Yani could not be a successful golfer, he wanted her to be a successful coach or manager. When Yani exhibited her talent, he taught her to learn from competition errors and failure.

"Mistakes are good opportunities for young people to learn," he said. "Young people need to tolerate mistakes so they can learn from them" (Yang, 2011, p. 98).

Yani's father had grown up in a traditional Chinese culture that was strict and harsh when children made mistakes. However, he eventually relinquished his traditional paternalistic leadership of Yani's golf development.

Once, after Yani had played very poorly at a weekend tournament, her father was very upset and yelled at her, *"I spent 130 US dollars to let you play this weekend, and you made so many bogeys"* (Yang, 2011, p. 14). Yani burst into tears and answered back immediately. Neither yielded, making things worse. Neither spoke to the other for a couple of weeks. Fortunately, Mr. Tseng realized that this situation was not right for his daughter's golf development.



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He observed that many Western parents hug their children whether they win or lose. He learned that Eastern authoritarian leadership uses many negative words that may discourage children.

Therefore, he changed his behavior from blaming and criticizing to caring and encouraging. *“I was not used to it at first,”* he said. *“I learned to love with a smile, but being gentle was difficult for me”* (Yang, 2011, p. 57). Having made the change in himself, he realised that many parents put too much pressure on their children.

“They put expectations on children because they want them to do something that they are unable to do at their ages, and this is not fair to children and creates a huge burden for them, which, in turn, makes children cheat when playing to win their parents’ hearts” (Yang, 2011, p. 58).

He commented that of the many “golden rules” of parenting talented children, a positive child-parent relationship is one of the most important.

Interacting with good coaches, trainers, and other golfers made Yani an experienced and skillful golfer. Yani learned from her parents’ education and from the daily behaviours that shaped her attitudes, visions, and psychological make-up.



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Psychological Make-up

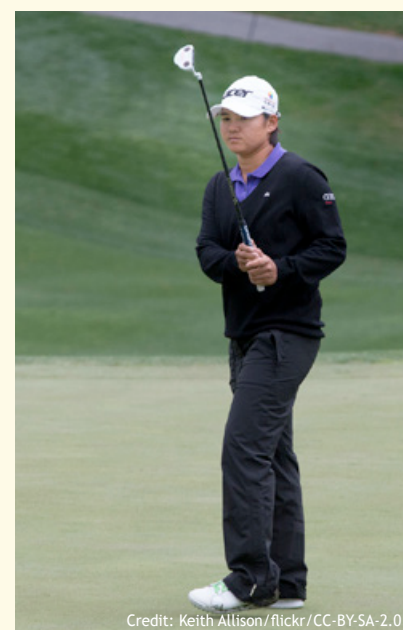
Sport psychologists who have studied the world's top athletes have identified many distinct personality traits, including confidence, resilience, competitiveness, a hard-work ethic, mental toughness, determination, and commitment (Gould et al., 2002). Yani possesses these personality traits as well as some additional traits, the most notable of which are described below.

High achievement-orientation

In Asia, especially in countries influenced by Chinese culture, people are taught to be humble and modest. Yani, however, is not. She is a highly achievement-oriented golfer. She talks publically about what she will achieve and often the words come true. For example, when she was 10 years old, she challenged a famous Taiwanese domestic golfer, Mr. Hsieh Min-Nan, to a putting competition. Yani's challenge made people laugh. In 2002, she visited the USA for the first time and watched the U.S. LPGA Open. After she returned to Taiwan, she mailed a postcard to her home-stay father back in America. The postcard was drawn by Yani herself with a picture of the U.S. Open trophy with the statement, *"This trophy is to be awarded to Yani Tseng."*

In 2005, she competed in the USA in numerous amateur and professional tournaments and became well-known on the professional circuit. However, she felt that some established golfers tended to ignore her. She returned to Taiwan and in a media interview she commented that *"I will beat these people until they know me!"* In 2007, she qualified as a professional golfer with the United States Golf Association (USGA) and in an interview with the Taiwanese media at the airport on her departure said *"I have set a goal to win the U.S. Open Championship within two years."*

In 2008, she was interviewed by the Taiwanese media again and commented *"Ha! This time I have changed my goal. I will win the U.S. Open Championship within one year."* She won that title before the year was over. In 2009, Yani was still far from being the world's best golfer but one day, as she watched the then World #1 Lorena Ochoa in competition, she commented to a friend, *"I won't let her stay in that place for too long!"*



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ambitious

Yani has had many seemingly boastful statements reported in the Taiwanese media. Her ambitious goals and strong achievement-oriented tendencies show similarities to other famous sporting stars. Former World #1 male golfer Tiger Woods and legendary heavyweight boxer Mohammed Ali made similar big statements. Such champions are confident in their ability and know they can achieve their goals. Perhaps the big talk inspired them to single-mindedly put all their energies into the pursuit of their goals and dreams.

Energy and passion

Yani inherited her father's energy and passion. She is interested in everything. She uses every opportunity to discover and to experience different things. Her coach, Gary Gilchrist, said Yani is a life-loving and passionate young lady. She not only loves golf but also many other sports, including billiards, basketball, tennis, and swimming. When visiting Australia for a golf tournament, she went to watch the Australia Tennis Open. When visiting the USA she watched a live National Basketball Association game. She is also a Major League Baseball (MLB) fan and often takes the opportunity to watch games live. She is the favourite fan of Taiwanese MLB pitcher, Chien-Ming Wang, of the Washington Nationals. In tennis, she said her role model is all-time great, Roger Federer. Yani loves sports, life and people.



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Yani is a hero in Taiwan

Coachability and intelligence

Yani is good at imitating and learning from others. Once she has observed other players' performances, she learns quickly from them. Her first golf coach, Mr. Kao, said Yani is highly coachable, *"Ordinary kids may need to be taught three times to learn a simple skill. Yani just needs a few seconds to master it."* She learns quickly not only in golf but also in billiards, tennis, basketball, and many other sports. She knows how to take the opportunity to learn. When she was 13, she competed in the Asian-Pacific Youth Golf Tournament and lost to a Korean golfer. She stayed at the golf course that afternoon and volunteered to be her victor's caddie. Her father asked her why, wondering if she felt any shame in doing that.

She replied, *"Not at all, I can observe her performing at close quarters. This is a great opportunity to learn"* (Yang, 2011, p. 31).



Outgoing and playful nature

Stereotypically, Asian golfers, male or female, are seen as shy and timid. Yani is different. She is an open-minded and outgoing young lady. Like her father, she loves laughing and spending time with friends.



Credit: Keith Allison/flickr/CC-BY-SA-2.0

Former women's golf champion, Annika Sörenstam, has become her best friend. Yani even bought Annika's house in Florida. She first respected Annika Sörenstam, Susan Peterson, and Lorena Ochoa as role models, and later Yani became good friends with them. She has Korean friends in golf, such as Se Ri Pak, Jiyai Shin, and Na Yeon Choi. Japanese elite golfers such as Ai Miyazato and Ueda Moshiko also rank among her good friends.

When with her friends, Yani likes to have fun and wears Mickey Mouse ears to amuse people. Although no scientific study has explained how such an outgoing and playful personality contributes to elite sport performance, Yani has said that competing with familiar friends reduces the pressure she feels.



Credit: Professor Ting-Heng Sung

Yani meets up with friends whenever she returns to Taiwan

Psychological Skills

As the World #1 ranked golfer, Yani refined her psychological skills during training and competition. She had been taught psychological skills during early experiences with coaches, but many of the skills she has learned from tough competitive experience. Yani is good at imagery and at developing pre-competition mental plans. She has a tremendous ability to retrieve previous successful experiences from memory and to visualise the exact path of long distance putts. In early 2012, she participated in the Honda LPGA Thailand, the Kia Classic, and the RR Donnelley LPGA Founders Cup. In all three championships she slipped well behind her opponents in the first two days. However, because of her amazing long putting ability and persistence, she battled back to win all three titles on the final holes. Professor Ting-Heng Sung, the head golf coach of the National Taiwan Sport University, emphasized that Yani uses imagery to rehearse every shot before actually hitting the ball. This psychological skill has enabled her to succeed during critical moments in competition.

In addition to basic psychological skills such as imagery, goal setting, and arousal regulation, Yani has also learned several important psychological skills from experts and other golfers. One of her most significant learning experiences came when she was working with sport psychologist, Dr. Deborah Graham. In the 2009 U.S. Open, Yani experienced a serious setback when she failed to make the cut into the final two rounds. She viewed it as a terrible experience because she had been so confident in her game and was ranked the World #2 player at the time. Her confidence and self-esteem were threatened and she struggled to deal with such a poor performance, crying in front of audiences and journalists. Her father and coach tried to comfort her, but they had little effect. She then decided to consult with Dr. Graham.



Credit: 欣盈 (Lily)/flickr/CC-BY-SA-2.0

focus solely
on the shot
at hand

After several discussions with Yani, Dr. Graham realized that her golf was being disrupted by negative self-talk, such as “*Don’t hit it into that bush,*” or “*If this shot goes there it would be a disaster.*” Dr. Graham taught her to turn these negative thoughts into positive ones. The most important change, however, was that she taught Yani to focus solely on the shot at hand and ignore what might follow. In addition, Dr. Graham used goal setting to adjust Yani’s mental state and attentional focus. She taught her to track daily experiences by writing down every shot and every result. She wanted Yani to set goals for every shot, every match, and every tournament. Once a goal was set, Yani focused on the goal rather than thinking about what might happen. By combining goal-setting and concentration skills, Yani found her performance improved.



Credit: 欣盈 (Lily)/flickr/CC-BY-SA-2.0

In addition to Dr Graham’s psychological interventions, former golf champion Annika Sörenstam significantly influenced Yani’s attitude and mental preparation.

Once, Yani invited Annika to her house and asked her how to be a world champion golfer. Annika, in turn, asked Yani, “*What do you do right now to be the best?*” Annika told Yani that to be the World #1 golfer she must attend to the whole process of training and competition. If the entire process is well-prepared and organised, it eventually leads to good results. She taught Yani several things about being the best golfer in the world. Specifically, she taught her to maintain a positive perspective.

“Whenever bad things happen,” Annika said, *“interpret these things as providing good opportunities for change”* (Yang, 2011, p. 73).

Further, she wanted Yani to adjust her mental state before, during, and after competition. She advised Yani to maintain good physical health and fitness. She used the success puzzle as a metaphor, with every piece of the puzzle being important.

Some of the pieces of the success puzzle include daily training, rest and sleep, nutrition, competition plans, travel, pre-competition rehearsal, as well as monitoring her interpersonal atmosphere. Annika’s message was that when all the pieces of the puzzle are put in the right place, success will eventually come.

every piece of
the success puzzle
is important

Talking to Annika changed Yani’s attitudes toward life management, training, and competition. Yani matured and became more insightful about her golfing career, eventually understanding that to be the world’s best golfer she needed to be strong mentally, physically, and technically, with all three factors complementing one another.

Yani learned much from Annika’s private lessons. The lessons not only taught her to prepare for golf systematically, but also got her to see golf competition and training as a holistic process. Yani’s change of attitudes and mental states in daily life, training, and competition made her a more mature player and person, and a good fit for the modern women’s golf arena.



Summary

We used the case of Taiwan's best golfer, Yani Tseng, to explain how psychology underpins a successful golf career. Her early life experiences confirmed that environmental (social and physical) and parental influences significantly affect talent development. Her learning experiences and social support helped her to build a solid foundation for elite performance. In addition, her family and social networks shaped her positive psychological make-up that has led to her success. Finally, psychological skills learned from coaches, sport psychologists, and other golfers made her almost invincible during her reign as the World #1 female player.

By the end of 2012, Yani was feeling the pressure of competing as the World #1 player and experienced an extended form slump, which saw her slip out of the world's top-40 ranked players, as of January 2014.



view video:
Yani talks
about the
pressure of
being World #1

In Yani's own words, *"I did put more pressure on myself when I was in that position, a lot more than I can carry"* (Robinson, 2013). Despite this setback, she maintains a positive mindset about the future, *"So, now I just try to focus on myself and enjoy it out there. I'm just learning to be patient. I know my game is there but I just need to keep trusting my game and believing I can do it. I think one day that will all come together. It doesn't matter how long it takes, when it comes it comes"* (Robinson, 2013).

It will be interesting to see what the future holds for Yani Tseng and her golf career.



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