



# STAR

## ON THE RISE

After decades of success on the men's tours, it appears as if Spanish golf has found a good reason to celebrate its players of the fairer sex. **Paul Prendergast** caught up with Azahara Munoz, the LPGA Tour's Louise Suggs Rookie of the Year for 2010.

In the final event of the 2009 Ladies European Tour season, young Spaniard Azahara Munoz, in her maiden professional appearance, stunned the golf fraternity by winning the Madrid Ladies Masters.

She achieved this in equally dramatic circumstances with an eagle in a playoff over the then LPGA Championship winner Anna Nordqvist. She also qualified for the LPGA Tour for 2010 and continued the ultra-impressive start to her professional career by finishing 30th on the final moneylist, culminating with her being crowned as the LPGA Tour's Louise Suggs Rookie of the Year for 2010 ahead of countrywoman Beatriz Recari.

On closer inspection, Azahara's (pronounced 'Athahara' or 'Atha' for

short) amateur credentials give a clear indication that these results were no fluke. Her profile on The Ladies European Tour website speaks for itself:

"A member of the Spanish national team, Munoz enjoyed a successful amateur career, winning the 2002 Spanish Amateur Championship and finishing runner-up at the 2008 US Women's Amateur Championship. She won the British Women's Amateur championship at Royal St David's in June 2009, defeating fellow Spaniard Carlota Ciganda in the final. At Arizona State University, Munoz was the 2009 NCAA Individual National Champion, as she led the Sun Devils to the team National Championships as well. As a junior, Munoz represented Europe on the junior Solheim Cup



"... AZAHARA'S ... AMATEUR CREDENTIALS GIVE A CLEAR INDICATION THAT THESE RESULTS WERE NO FLUKE."

team in 2002, 2003 and 2005."

Munoz started her rookie year on the LPGA Tour ranked 179th in world and finished it ranked 41st.

As only the sixth European player to win the Rookie of the Year title and with her profile seriously on the rise, I was able to have a series of conversations with the just-turned 23-year-old about her year, her plans and her start in the game.

**PAUL PRENDERGAST: Aza, thanks for spending some time with me. Congratulations on winning the 2010 Louise Suggs LPGA Tour Rookie of the Year award. A great thrill?**

**AZAHARA MUNOZ:** Thank you for having me. And thank you, it is a great thrill. It is such an honour to win this award, and you can only win it once in your life. So I am really excited to have achieved this.



**PP: You were very emotional in your acceptance speech when thanking your parents. Tell us a little about your start in the game and about your parents?**

**AM:** I am always very emotional when it comes to my parents. They have always given everything for me and supported me no matter what. And the most important thing is that they only care if I'm happy. They care about that first, and then if I play good, it is a plus.

I started to play when I was eight, on a pub-

lic driving range they built in my town. Kids could go on Saturdays from 12 to one to get free lessons. We were a lot of kids and it was just fun to go with all of them. Then I liked it a lot and started to go more and more.

**PP: After a glittering collegiate and amateur career,**

"I'M JUST GOING TO KEEP PRACTISING HARD AND PLAYING MY BEST..."

**you sensationally won your first event as a professional, the Madrid Ladies Masters, at the back end of 2009. Did that success and the way you achieved it play a part in your rookie year success in the US?**

**AM:** You know, I would have never changed what happened in Madrid. That meant that I had a place to play for the next three years if I didn't make it in the States. At the same time, it threw a little more pressure on me. A lot of people were expecting at least a win from me on the LPGA Tour and it hasn't happened. But I take it as a good thing. I would never change that, no matter what.

**PP: You were very solid this year, top 20 in 10 of the 21 events you played on the LPGA Tour and 30th on the moneylist. Did these results exceed your expectations at the start of the year?**

**AM:** Honestly, I didn't have any expectations for the year. So I can't say if they exceed it or not. The year started OK and then I played really well in the middle (Majors

Spaniard Azahara Munoz received the 2010 Louise Suggs Rolex Rookie of the Year award – a once-in-a-lifetime honour.



and big tournaments). However, I didn't have a strong finish. Missed some cuts at the end and I think that's the reason why I'm not extremely happy about my performance. The good thing about it is that I know what I need to work on, and when I get back to work after a little break, I will work on it.

**PP: When I met you and saw you play for the first time in the ANZ Ladies Masters in Australia in March 2010, in the practice rounds and on the range, I thought your iron play was crisp (even in the wet!). It was no surprise to me to see that you ranked highly in greens in regulation in 2010 despite statistically not being one of the longer hitters on tour. Do you see this as a strength of your game?**

**AM:** Yeah, it was a big strength all year except at the end. Normally my long game is very precise, and

if my putter gets hot I can go low. However, the last tournaments of the year I have struggled with that. I was trying to make some swing changes and maybe I should have waited till the off-season. But definitely it is my biggest strength!

**PP: Are the swing changes in the off-season minor or major?**

**AM:** They are minor changes... on my downswing, my right elbow is a bit far from my body. So I'm going to try to work on that!

**PP: You only have a rookie year once where every week is a new experience. What were the things that impressed you most about being on tour this year?**

**AM:** I met a lot of great people this year and I made really good friends. Not only players, but also host families that I stayed with. Friends are really important for me so I think that's what I liked the best.

What impressed me the most? Maybe how much travelling there is. At the end of the year I was exhausted. I knew there was a lot of it, but I didn't expect it to be so tough on my body.

**PP: Did the 'stop, start' nature of the tour schedule this past year help or hinder you as a rookie, do you think?**

**AM:** At the beginning I kind of liked it, because I had time to come back home to Spain and be with my family, friends, and have time to practise. That was only at the beginning. Towards the middle and end of the year, all we did was play. I even played six in a row, which I can tell you I won't do again!

**PP: Obviously, your future lies on the LPGA Tour, but playing as regularly as possible on the LET must be something you're aiming at too?**

**AM:** I would love to be able to play in both. To be honest, I would like to play on the LET more often because it is closer to home. But the LPGA is the main tour, and if you want to be good at any of them you have to focus on one. Playing half and half is not going to take you anywhere, really. So for the next few years, I will keep my focus on the LPGA Tour and later on I might come back and play in Europe. That's my plan for now, hopefully it works.

**PP: You said you didn't have great expectations in your first year, but your play in the Majors and the big events this year must have given you a good idea of what you're capable of doing on tour. Have you set some specific goals for 2011, or are you just looking for incremental improvements in your game?**

**AM:** I have never set any goals so I'm not going to change that.

**PP: Making the Solheim Cup team in 2011 on European soil must be on your radar?**

**AM:** I would love to make the Solheim Cup. It would be amazing. I'm just going to keep practising hard and playing my best and hopefully I'll be in Ireland playing for Europe.

**PP: Obviously you're supporting the Spanish bids for the 2015 Cup.**

**AM:** Of course I am! And it's not only Spain, but my city that is trying to get it. I would always support Spain and if it is to get events like the Solheim Cup, even more. I would be there for whatever they need.

**PP: Four years at Arizona State University would have you well acclimatised to US conditions. How did you find the Asian tournament experiences last year? I imagine it was your first time playing in the region?**

**AM:** Yeah, it was my first time in Asia. People, food and things like that are different, but we were all hanging out together so I didn't really feel that it was that much different. I kind of like meeting new cultures and new people so I liked the experience.

**PP: Thanks very much for your time and best wishes for 2011.**

'Second year syndrome' is often an anchor for rookies in many sports, but not necessarily so in an individual sport such as golf. Learning about golf courses, travel schedules, hotels, restaurants, finding the best times for rest and practice are hard lessons to be learned in your first year on tour, but lessons that can reap benefits in the ensuing years.

Munoz's progress in the game from her amateur years, through collegiate golf and as a professional of a little over 12 months would suggest she is a quick learner!

Did I mention the psychology degree she picked up at Arizona State along the way? There is a definite 'achievement orientation' in this girl and there is no reason to suggest she will not continue climbing the ladder at her current rate – watch this space!