



## KIRAN MATHARU

The hottest property in ladies' European golf is a teenager from Leeds. **DAVE BOWERS** talks to Kiran Matharu about her future, her family and a certain teenager from Hawaii

Kiran Matharu is the youngest player on the Ladies' European Tour.

At 17, she is the same age as Michelle Wie – and many believe she can achieve as much as the A-list Hawaiian.

Matharu won the English Ladies' Amateur Championship last year and has won the Faldo Junior Series, twice. She has represented Great Britain and Ireland in the Curtis Cup. And, as if to cement her arrival on the scene, she recently signed a six-figure sponsorship deal.

But she's a trailblazer in more than one way. As a young Asian female succeeding in sport, she is a huge icon for sections of British youth. And while comparisons with Wie are inevitable, Matharu takes them in her stride.

She said: "I have now realised I'm an icon to British Asians – and maybe to all British golfing youngsters! It makes me feel good to be an icon because it tells me I am making an impact on the game of golf.

"I play golf to win and be an icon just like Tiger Woods. I do get compared to Michelle Wie a lot but it doesn't put any more pressure on me at all. Being Britain's 'answer to Michelle Wie' is a huge compliment to me."

The Leeds-born teenager would not be fazed by playing with the high-profile, world no 15, either.

"We played together in a practice round at the 2005 Open. I think Michelle is a lovely girl and obviously very good at golf. I would love to play with her in a

tournament sometime soon."

If Matharu achieves her ambitions for 2007 she will jump ahead of Wie in at least one sphere. The American has yet to win a LPGA event – indeed, much of her time has been spent trying to make cuts on the men's tour. But Matharu is certain of her direction.

"My ambition for this year is to try to win three or more tournaments – and if that happens it will give me a good chance of making the Solheim Cup team," she said, without a hint of tongue in cheek. She's not arrogant: she just knows what she can do and is aware of what she needs to do. That's focus. And she remains realistic.

She added: "I think I need to improve every part of my game because it can never be perfect. Chipping and putting are the most important parts of the game, so I will be concentrating on that more this year."

For British sports fans so familiar with rising stars who wilt as soon as the bright lights are turned on to them, Matharu's attitude is refreshing.

One doesn't get the impression her head will be turned by media coverage or that she will be distracted by the sort of off-course activities which put paid to Anna Kournikova's tennis career.

It all started for her when she accompanied her father, Amarjit, to the driving range at Cookridge Hall Golf Club, in Leeds, when she was aged 11. A club pro told her she had a natural swing and offered to coach her. Within months she had a

handicap of 38 and by the end of the year was captaining Yorkshire's under-16s.

Two years later, she was playing off six and was in the England under-16 side. And she stormed through 2003, claiming titles across the land, to win the English under-18 order of merit.

Matharu has insisted in the past that her success is not down to having a pushy father – a suggestion which has, more than once, been aimed at her dad.

"It depends what you mean by pushy - do you mean making you do it or just supporting you? No, my dad doesn't make me do it. He's just got me the best opportunities - the best coach, manager, everything. But he hasn't made me do it," she insisted in an earlier interview.

Perhaps her success lies in a large dose of natural sporting talent. Nobody accused Jack and Bobby Charlton of having pushy parents; their uncle was Jackie Milburn – sporting ability ran in the family. And it is the same for Matharu.

She explained: "My dad and uncles had their own football and cricket teams. My dad used to play golf off a four handicap but he doesn't play anymore. My cousin, Rav Matharu, played football for Leeds under-19s and my brother, Haminder 'Froggy' Matharu, played cricket for Leeds and Yorkshire.

"He now plays golf off scratch, is the Leeds amateur champion and plays for Leeds. Sport is important to all the men and boys in my family, but I am the only girl who plays a sport."

In the modern, cash-conscious, celebrity-driven world it did not take long for the commercial world to realise Matharu was a very marketable commodity: young, Asian, attractive and immensely talented. Subsequently she has the ubiquitous management team – but early indications are they're not asking too much of her. And

she has faith in them to help get her to where she wants to go. She explained: "My ultimate ambition is to be the no.1 woman golfer in the world. I think I have a very good chance of achieving it because I work hard and do the right things. I also have a great team of people helping me."

Let's hope they all continue doing the right things. Golf would benefit from a successful Kiran Matharu... ▶

AND YOU CAN'T SEE THE TEES FOR THE WOODS...

WHEN THE XAVIER COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL TEAM WON THE 2006 STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS, THE WINNER OF THE INDIVIDUAL TITLE RAISED A FEW EYEBROWS.

FROM CERTAIN ANGLES SHE LOOKED UNCANNILY LIKE TIGER WOODS AND SHE HELD HER POSE IN HER FOLLOW-THROUGH IN THE SAME STYLE AS THE WORLD NO.1 WHAT WAS MORE TELLING WAS THAT THE 16-YEAR-OLD, FROM PHOENIX, ARIZONA, SHARED THE SAME SURNAME.

CHEYENNE WOODS IS TIGER'S NIECE – THE DAUGHTER OF HIS HALF-BROTHER EARL JNR. AND LIKE HER UNCLE SHE WAS INTRODUCED TO THE SPORT BY EARL SNR.

TIGER EXPLAINED: SHE IS NOT QUITE AS FIERY AS I AM ON THE OUTSIDE AND PLAYS VERY PATIENTLY. SHE HAS AN OPEN LINE OF COMMUNICATION WITH ME. SHE JUST HAS TO STAY WITH IT, KEEP GRINDING AWAY AND KEEP HAVING FUN DOING IT.

AND HE HAS OFFERED HER ADVICE.

CHEYENNE SAID: HE SAID JUST KICK BUTT AND HAVE FUN...

WE HAVE BEEN WARNED.