



Anthony Kim on the PGA Tour

A BREAKOUT SEASON

By JAY C. UPCHURCH

The free-spirited former Sooner standout golfer made an abrupt about-face in his approach to a professional career—and it is paying off *big time*.



There is nothing shy about Anthony Kim.

From his flashy trademark belt buckles, ornately inscribed with his initials, to his brash, shoot-from-the-hip persona, the 23-year-old native Californian is irrefutably extroverted.

Kim has been described by critics as “a spoiled brat,” and praised by golf aficionados as “the next coming of Tiger Woods.” His occasional moody on-course displays have drawn the ire of other PGA players, many of whom have openly admitted to being impressed by his abundant talents.

Not quite two full seasons into his professional career, Anthony Kim has become one of the most talked about (and

watched) players on the PGA Tour. Deservedly so. Heading into the final stretch of the 2008 schedule, the former University of Oklahoma All-American had already put together the type of year most golfers only dream about.

In early May, Kim won his first PGA Tour title when he bested the field at the Wachovia Championship. Barely two months later, he joined Woods, Sergio Garcia and Adam Scott as the only players under 25 in the last decade to record multiple PGA Tour victories in the same season when he captured the AT&T National crown.

“It’s been incredible. This is what I’ve been dreaming about



AP Photo/Jason E. Miczek

Anthony Kim watches his sand shot on the ninth hole during the first round of the Wachovia Championship golf tournament in Charlotte, N.C., Thursday, May 1, 2008.



After sleep-walking through his rookie year on the PGA Tour—a year that included four top-10 finishes and \$1.5 million in earnings—Kim came to a crossroads in his young life that actually had him questioning his future in the sport. Up to that point, he thought winning would come easy, but he had been more interested in partying than practicing, and many felt that was holding him back.

“I was still an immature kid last year. But I think not winning may have been the best thing that could have happened to me,” explains Kim. “The reality of it was kind of a slap in the face. It let me know I can’t just walk out there and be as successful as I want to be without practicing and committing myself to every shot and every round.”

During the offseason, Kim decided to adjust his priorities. He stayed away from the bar scene, which had become a big part of his regular routine, and retained the services of OU strength and conditioning coach Darby Rich, who started Kim on a rigorous weight-training program. Regular visits to the practice range also became the norm.

“Looking back, that was embarrassing,” says Kim of his irresponsible lifestyle and lackadaisical approach to golf. “I didn’t respect the game enough, and I didn’t respect myself enough.”

Kim’s renewed dedication began paying dividends almost immediately, as he finished

third at the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic in January. A runner-up finish at the Verizon Heritage in mid-April netted a \$484,000 paycheck and set the stage for his first PGA Tour win two weeks later.

“Incredible,” offers Kim, recounting what he describes as a life-altering performance. “That walk up to the final hole was the best feeling in my entire life. I still get chills thinking about it.”

Kim admits he is anxious to experience that winning feeling as often as possible, and staying true to form—at least where his confidence level is concerned—he is not afraid to talk about it.

“I want to be No. 1. I want to win majors. I want to be the best player I can be,” says Kim, who had moved up to No. 16 in the world rankings by September and more importantly secured a spot on the U.S. Ryder Cup team.

my whole life, and fulfilling this dream is awesome,” says Kim, pointing to his first two wins as a professional golfer. “Now, my focus is to keep it going, keep working hard and see how good I can really be.”

Do not mistake Kim’s supreme confidence for arrogance, although some detractors are tempted to do just that. The 2008 version of Anthony Kim is different.

Different from the 2007 version. Different from the 2006 version. And most definitely different from the kid who showed up in Norman in 2003 and eventually tied an OU record by winning five collegiate titles, including the Big 12 championship as a sophomore.

The difference?

His maturity level, according to Kim.

"I feel if I play well, I can play with anybody."

Kim's play over the last few months is a pretty good start, even though it comes, at least in part, with Woods sidelined with a knee injury. Some might even argue Woods' absence puts a damper on Kim's efforts, but former Sooner All-American Andrew Magee scoffs at the very idea.

"Tiger or no Tiger, this kid has played his butt off this year. To suggest what Anthony Kim has done is anything less than impressive is just ridiculous," says Magee, a 23-year PGA Tour veteran and part-time analyst for the Golf Channel. "What I'm most impressed about is the way he's played with the lead. He's shown he has a killer instinct, and you just don't see that in many young players.

"Anthony has this mechanism in his head that great players have. He's mentally tough, plus he's got just enough recklessness in his game to make him dangerous."

Kim, who won the 2001 Junior World Championship, had initially thought about turning pro after finishing high school in La Quinta, California. But the son of Korean immigrants put his plans on hold to go to college, signing with Jim Ragan's Oklahoma program, mostly to make his mother happy.

During three somewhat tumultuous seasons with the Sooners, Kim earned All-America honors three times. In fact, he was the


first Sooner ever to earn All-America honors as a freshman.

Kim was also just the sixth OU player to win a conference title, joining Magee, Grant Waite, Hunter Haas, Charlie Coe and Jim Vickers.

"My experience at OU was great. I will always be thankful for the opportunity I had to play there," says Kim. "The people I met in Oklahoma, the friends I made—those things will always be a part of me."

According to Ragan, the golfing world has only just begun to witness what Kim is capable of accomplishing.

"Anthony has an incredible amount of talent, he's incredibly confident, and his golf IQ is extremely high. That is a great combination to have," adds Ragan. "People may not always see those things because he is such a free spirit, but he's one of the few guys out there who has what it takes to challenge a Tiger Woods.

"As Anthony gets older and continues to mature, he's only going to get better and better. How good he becomes will all depend on what he wants to put into it. If you look at what he's done this year, that's a pretty good indication of where he's going." 

Jay C. Upchurch is editor in chief of Sooner Spectator and writes freelance OU sports articles for Sooner Magazine.



An exuberant Anthony Kim cheers on teammate Boo Weekley during four-ball match play at the 2008 Ryder Cup tournament. Fellow Ryder rookie Hunter Mahan, right, led the victorious U.S. team in individual points scored, with Kim close behind.

Kim's Ryder Cup Run

OU's Anthony Kim injected his own brand of Sooner enthusiasm into the U.S. Ryder Cup Team's first win over the Europeans since 1999. One of six rookies on the 12-man team, and the youngest at 23, Kim added 2½ points to the Americans' 16½ to 11½ triumph.

Playing at Louisville, Kentucky, September 19-21, Kim paired with Phil Mickelson on the first day, halving the morning round and winning 2 up in the afternoon. He and Mickelson lost their Saturday morning match 2 and 1, but after sitting out Saturday afternoon, Kim came roaring back on Sunday. Leading off the singles competition against Spaniard Sergio Garcia, Kim quickly took control, turning in a dominating performance en route to a 5 and 4 win.

Describing the experience to PGA's Kelly Ellbin as "one of the most exciting rounds of golf I've played in my life," Kim insisted he "wouldn't trade this for 10 million dollars."