

Olympic Golf - Men's Competition - First Round Notes and Summary

July 29, 2021

Kasumigaseki Country Club - East Course - Par 71, 7,466 yards

Leaders/Leader Notes

Sepp Straka	Austria	32-31--63
Jazz Janewattananond	Thailand	33-31--64
Thomas Pieters	Belgium	35-30--65
Carlos Ortiz	Mexico	34-31--65

Sepp Straka	
Olympic Ranking	40
Official World Golf Ranking	161
Professional Victories	1
2016 Rio Olympics	N/A
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Born in Vienna, Austria, to American mother and Austrian father Moved to Valdosta, Georgia, USA when 14 but still feels strong connection to Austria Sepp and twin brother Sam played at University of Georgia Sam is caddying for Sepp this week, which he's done several times before Sepp became first Austrian-born player to earn PGA TOUR card (2019), which came after he won the 2018 KC Golf Classic on Korn Ferry Tour

Jazz Janewattananond	
Olympic Ranking	33
Official World Golf Ranking	150
Professional Victories	7
2016 Rio Olympics	N/A
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 25-year-old from Thailand won his first Asian Tour title at the 2017 Bashundhara Bangladesh Open by four shots At the age of 14 years and 71 days, became the youngest player in Asian Tour history to make the cut at the 2010 Asian Tour International in Bangkok Took a break from golf at the end of 2016 to become a monk. Typically wears an orange shirt on Sunday, the color of monk's saffron. In January 2019, won the SMBC Singapore Open (a co-sanctioned Japan Tour/Asian Tour event), before three additional titles in 2019 brought his total Asian Tour wins to six. Earned the Order of Merit title that year

Thomas Pieters	
Olympic Ranking	28
Official World Golf Ranking	120
Professional Victories	4
2016 Rio Olympics	4
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highest returning finisher from 2016 Olympics in Rio at solo 4th, 4 strokes behind third place • Takes great pride in representing Belgium again as an Olympian and says winning a medal for the small country would mean legendary status • Despite not feeling well and not playing back nine before first round, made eagle-2 on No. 11 and shot 5-under 30 to close his round • Born in Geel, Belgium in 1992, and began playing golf at the age of 5 • Won NCAA Division I individual title as sophomore at the University of Illinois in 2013, beating likes of Jordan Spieth and former No.1 amateur Patrick Cantlay

Carlos Ortiz	
Olympic Ranking	20
Official World Golf Ranking	61
Professional Victories	4
2016 Rio Olympics	N/A
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ortiz is staying in the Olympic Village and soaking up the experience, calling it a once-in-a-lifetime experience; he is staying with members of the Mexican boxing team • He's trying to add to his medal collection, having won a bronze medal in the 2011 Sumer Universiade team competition • Has the distinction of being the first Mexican player to win on the PGA TOUR in 42 years (2020) • He currently owns one PGA TOUR victory and three Korn Ferry Tour wins • Was voted the 2014 Korn Ferry Tour Player of the Year • Golf championships run in the family as younger brother, Alvaro, won the 2019 Latin America Amateur Championship

Summary

Sepp Straka Races to Opening Lead with 63 in Men's Olympic Tournament

KAWAGOE, JAPAN – The Olympic golf competition saved the best for first as it got underway Thursday at Kasumigaseki Country Club under clear skies and a penetrating sun.

Once Japan's Rikuya Hoshino calmed his nerves to lace the opening drive down the fairway shortly after 7:30 a.m. local time, focus turned to his fellow playing competitors, Sepp Straka of Austria and Thomas Pieters of Belgium, as they made quick work of the ideal scoring conditions. Quite literally.

By the time Straka set an East Course record and matched the 2016 Olympic men's record of 8-under-par 63, and Pieters shot his own 65, they were nearly three full holes ahead of the next grouping. Straka's two-stroke lead eventually would dwindle to one after Jazz Janewattanond of Thailand, who was 6-under through 15 when an afternoon thunderstorm delayed play for over two hours, came back to birdie the final hole for a 64.

Pieters, who overcame a rough day on Wednesday with a slight fever and headache, was matched by Carlos Ortiz of Mexico, while Joachim Hansen of Denmark and Jhonattan Vegas of Venezuela shot 66. The top of the leaderboard was decidedly international, with 17 countries represented among the top 20, which excluded notable names such as the host country's main hope, Hideki Matsuyama (69), Collin Morikawa (69) and Justin Thomas (71 with 18 pars) of USA, and Rory McIlroy of Ireland (69), to name a few.

Straka, who lived in Austria until age 14 before his family moved to the U.S., obviously was comfortable in the lead-off position and with the pairing he had. "We had a really good group, had some good mojo going in the group and first off was great," he said. "We didn't have to wait on anybody and we played quickly, but we didn't feel rushed because we had some pretty good space between us and the group behind us, so that was really key."

On the surface, Straka seemingly had no reason to expect a round that matched the 63s recorded at the 2016 Rio Olympics by Australia's Marcus Frazier (first round) and bronze medalist Matt Kuchar of the USA (final round). In his last seven starts on the PGA TOUR, Straka had six missed cuts sandwiched around one bright spot of a T10 at the Travelers Championship. But he saw promise.

"I felt like my game was in a pretty good spot," said Straka, who has the added support this week of twin brother Sam serving as his caddie. "Those first few weeks before Travelers when I missed the cut my irons were bad, but my short game was really good. So I worked on my irons a lot and then my short game got bad. So that's when I missed the last couple cuts. But yeah, I just changed my putting routine up a little bit and it worked really well and my irons have been pretty good the last few weeks, so I felt pretty good about my game."

Straka was steady throughout, giving himself good scoring opportunities with fairways hit and strong iron play to finish with eight birdies.

Janewattananond, meanwhile, checked his initial nerves to finish the day with an unblemished card that included seven birdies. "I feel very good to be representing Thailand," he said. "Playing golf is a different mindset when you're not playing for yourself, but you're playing for your country and a medal. I've played every major. I got very nervous at the Masters, but this was more nervous than that."

Pieters, on the other hand, didn't know what to expect as he entered the day, physically drained from the fever and headache that still had a lingering effect when he woke up Thursday. "I felt horrible this morning even when I woke up, but maybe it's just because I wasn't thinking about bad shots or places not to hit it," he said. "My caddie (Adam Marrow) told me hit it there and I did it ... I kept it simple."

Pieters was only able to practice on the front nine, which he played Thursday in one under par. Then he made the turn and relying on his caddie, holed out for an eagle-2 on No. 11 and added birdies on 13, 17 and 18. "Adam did a great job," Pieters said. "I didn't play my way out of the tournament the first day, so that's good."

Which leaves him in a position to contend again for a medal. Pieters is the highest returning finisher from Rio, where he finished fourth despite a third-round 77 that sidetracked his otherwise stellar play with rounds of 67, 66 and 65.

Ortiz, who also finished his round before the storm hit, made seven birdies and a lone bogey on No. 9.

"It's a great round, I'm really happy the way I played," he said. "Everything wasn't perfect from the beginning, I had to figure it out a little bit. I couldn't hit the fairways and this golf course is pretty tough from the rough. So, once I got in a rhythm and started hitting fairways it became a little bit more easy and opened up the golf course. And obviously you guys have seen these greens are perfect, so if you start to roll the ball great you can make a lot of putts."

It's something that translates easily into all golf languages.

Other Quotes

Hideki Matsuyama on representing the host country: “This experience could be the first and last that I ever get to do to play the Olympics in my home country, but hopefully tomorrow I'll be able to put together a better round. If I say there's no pressure I'll be lying, so hopefully I'll be able to embrace the pressure and that's upon me and just try to put together a nice tournament here.”

Justin Thomas, who made 18 straight pars, on his putting: “It's really hard. I would love to have some kind of old useless club that I could break over my knee right now. I mean, I'm going to be honest. But you got to stay patient and trust the process, I guess could you say, but it obviously is annoying when I'm not really seeing the results and things that I feel like the work I'm putting in. But I'm getting closer, like I said, it's just so -- I never had so many putts, like especially at The Open Championship and had some again here, where I feel like I'm hitting good putts, feel like it's good speed and they're just lipping out instead of lipping in. You get on those runs sometimes and it sucks so bad when it's doing that. But sooner or later maybe it will just take one day and they will fall in for me and I'll get hot. But it doesn't feel as far off as it looks.”

Paul Casey, who shot 67, on his opening drive: “So cool that was. Not an ounce of nerves, a hundred percent excitement, which is really, really cool. Yeah, just really proud, to be honest. I think that's sort of the coolest thing because I thought about it for so long, to actually -- because to me you can't class yourself an Olympian until you've actually started your competition. Especially with the COVID tests going on, to get through every single COVID test, come on, cross the fingers. Yeah, it was just brilliant. And then it's just down to business.”

Jhonattan Vegas on whether being a 2-time Olympian make this even more special: “It does, I mean it does, especially as golf grows and as golf grows in the Olympics and just to put your name in the history like that it's always cool, it's always fun, especially like I said, on an event bigger than golf and yourself, this is what sport is all about. It's just fun being, putting your name in that.”

Sepp Straka of Austria on when the Olympics got on his radar: “When they had them in Brazil I was watching, I wasn't close to qualifying back then but I was watching and it was seemed like a cool event and everybody that I knew that went over there and played just raved about it. So I knew at that point that that was going to be on my radar and definitely wanted to play well so I could play my way in.”

Corey Connors of Canada on competing as an Olympian without fans: “Yeah it's definitely a bit strange with no fans but you still feel the prestige of the event and how special it is. It was cool getting announced on the first tee and really proud and honored to represent Canada and heart was beating a little faster than normal on the first tee, but yeah, it's a cool experience. It would be a lot better if there was fans out here, but we have had to deal with that a little bit on the (PGA) TOUR.”

Adri Arnaus of Spain on the Olympic experience: “I don't think it gets much better than being mixed with all the athletes and getting to meet some of the Spanish icons from the sport, it's been really, really cool and, yeah, it's been awesome.”

Sebastian Munoz of Colombia on his experience so far: “Really good. A lot of firsts for me. Just humbled, humbled by a lot of different athletes, a lot of different guys. The best athletes in the world are here, it's fun to be in the village, it's fun to see them do their thing, talk to them, knowing people, it's definitely something, so really thankful that I'm here and really excited to pursue this tournament and many others.”