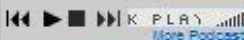


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SGCA TOURNAMENT

No ordinary freshman

Terrier phenom looking to qualify for state tourney

 By KEVIN TRUDGEON, Staff Writer
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From stature to demeanor to everything in between, Redlands High School's Khemkhon Limbhasut does not resemble your typical high school freshman.

For one thing, the five-foot-10-inch kid who goes by KK around his friends and family weighs in at a solid 180 pounds and more closely resembles an upperclassman on first glance.

He has his own personal website, www.khemkhon.com, is still adjusting to a move across the Pacific Ocean from his homeland of Thailand less than a year-and-a-half ago and only gets to see his mother and younger sister once every few months.

Oh, and he will also tee off at the SCGA Tournament, which serves as the unofficial Southern California Golf Championship, at Pasadena's Brookside Golf Course today for the chance to advance to the state championship at the Poppy Hills Golf Course in Pebble Beach.

But where some might worry that such a young golfer, only 15-years old, may wilt under the pressure, it only takes a little time to realize that normal rules don't really apply to KK.

Like the idea that Terrier freshmen golfers meet Head Coach Kevin Kirkland for the first time around campus or out at the first team tryout.

KK emailed him while in eighth grade at Cope Middle School.

"I knew I was going to go (to RHS) and I wanted to let him know I wanted to play on the team," he said.

It was a pleasant surprise for Kirkland, who said it didn't

take long to find out about his incoming phenom.

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Photo credit: SCGA

A quick trip to Google brought him to KK's website, which lists his accomplishment on the links over the years.

Or the notion that outside distractions can only hurt you in a game like golf, where mental fortitude is as important, if not more so, as physical prowess.

Looking to play against a more diverse field and improve his chances of earning a scholarship to a top-flight school, KK and his father Kittipat, who goes by Ball, flew into LAX with suitcases in hand in January of 2011.

The only problem was they did not know where they were going.

"The first night when we came here, we had no plan, nothing, no idea or anything," said Ball. "I was thinking we might go to San Diego, but I had a friend who said he couldn't help us if we went there because it was so far away."

"But he said if we stay closer to L.A. then he could help us. So we ended up choosing Loma Linda."

Although there was the understandable culture shock from such a dramatic move, KK benefited from having attended an international school in Bangkok, where he learned to speak and understand a little English, having traveled to Florida every summer to play in tournaments when he was younger and the plethora of nearby Thai restaurants that gave him a taste of home.

And whenever he did get overwhelmed, he had a multitude of golfing options as his fingertips.

From the Redlands Country Club, where he played the majority of his home matches with RHS, to Beaumont's Oak Valley Golf Club or PGA of Southern California Golf Club to San Bernardino's Arrowhead Country Club, KK has never been without golf options.

"I practice five days and there are a lot of nice courses around here," he said. "And being in (Southern) California, you can play all year."

And then there is the long-held belief that no matter how much talent someone has, you can't account for a lack of experience.

Sure KK had spent plenty of weekends playing in tournaments all over the country, but how would he fair in a team-like atmosphere where he wasn't just playing for himself but also for his Terrier teammates.

He went on to lead RHS to a second-place finish, helped them beat crosstown rival Redlands East Valley for the first time in four years and captured the Citrus Belt League Individual Championship.

Since then he's shot a 69 to finish tied for fifth at the Central Individual Regional at the Desert Willow Golf Course on May 16 and a 73 to finish tied for ninth at the Individual Finals at the Industry Hills Golf Course on May 23.

Now he sits as one of 134 golfers vying for a top-six finish to earn a trip to the state championship on June 8.

Logic would seem to indicate that the odds are stacked against KK. He will be competing against the best high school golfers in Southern California, many of whom have reached this stage in the postseason before and know what kind of pressure to expect.

Then again, since when did the rules apply to him?

"He was asking me if the (SCGA Tournament) is a big deal,"

Kirkland said. "And I told him yes, these are the top golfers around and you have a chance to advance to the state tournament. And he said he thinks he'd like to go out and win it. Not just try to qualify, he wants to win it. And if he plays his best he can."

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