Ojaswini, 13, becomes second-youngest to make Ladies European Tour cut

Tushar Bhaduri
New Delhi, October 23

OJASWINI SARASWAT, 13, made the cut at the Hero Women's Indian Open on Friday. She is the youngest player to do so at the tournament, and the second-youngest to make a cut at any Ladies European Tour event, after Thailand's Ariya Jutanugarn. The Tour said the previous Indian Open record belonged to Aditi Ashok, who was 14 in 2012.

Saraswat will play the weekend rounds at the DLF Golf & Country Club in Gurgaon, in her first event against professionals. She is an amateur.

It did not look likely after an opening round of seven-over 79. "She was playing with some of her idols, Pranavi Urs, Aditi Ashok, Vani Kapoor and Avani Prashanth among Indians, and Shannon Tan among the international contingent, which brought a degree of anxiety into her game," her father Om told The Indian Express after the second round.

"After that, we told her to play her game freely as she had nothing to lose. Her mentor Harmeet Kahlon, an Arjuna awardee who was her first coach before moving to Canada, also boosted her morale."

Saraswat felt she needed a level-par second round to make the weekend. She shot a three-under 69, with birdies on her last three holes, and is tied 26th after two days. "Even after the first round, I believed that I could make the cut," she said. "Now, my aim is to finish at least in the top 10. If I play over the next two days like I did today, I think I can do it."



13-year-old Ojaswini Saraswat shot 69 on Friday. EXPRESS

She was not sure she would play at all. The Women's Golf Association of India updated its rankings on September 29, and Saraswat entered the top four of the amateur standings. That sealed her spot. "When we got the invite, we initially thought it was to watch the event as we had been doing for the last three years," Om said.

It was also her first time at the DLF course, which Gary Player designed.

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> **OM SARASWAT,**
> OJASWINI'S FATHER, ON HOW HE OVERCAME THE CHALLENGE TO FIND THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT

Her mother was pregnant when the golf range opposite their home in Mohali was coming up.

"We decided that we will encourage our child to play golf," Om said. "She started when she was four and quickly developed an interest in the sport. That was crucial because you can't force a child to take up a sport."

Equipment for a four-year-old was hard to find. Om, who runs a construction business, had a fix. "I got clubs designed for 7-8-year-olds and cut them so that Ojaswini could use them."

Learning on the job

Neither parent had played the game. "We have learnt on the job about yardages, clubs and the scoring in the sport."

She finished runner-up at the 2024 US Kids World Championship at Pinehurst and won a silver medal at the US Kids European Championship. Sponsors such as Callaway and Roundglass followed. The training costs money.

"She attends online classes from coaches in the US and Thailand, where a 20-minute session could cost around Rs 6,000. A weekly class from both can set us back by about Rs 50,000 a month," said Om, who shares his time between Mohali and Jaipur.

Golf takes most of her time, and she does not attend school. "She's busy playing tournaments all over the place and her mother accompanies her. She hasn't gone to school for three years but takes tuitions whenever she's home. Fortunately, she's good at academics and regularly scores 90 per cent in her exams."

The family is in no hurry for her to turn professional. "We want her to stay amateur for at least another two years. Playing for big amounts of money in strong fields under great pressure demands a level of mental toughness that comes only with age," Om said.

Asked about her ultimate ambition, she said: "I want to represent India at the Olympics, and not just represent, but win." She is a self-described Rory McIlroy fan.

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