





# Masashi “Jumbo” Ozaki

**REPRESENTING...**  
*For the golf punks all across the world*

The Japanese hero who polarised opinion on the global stage...

Words: Richard Lenton

Jumbo Ozaki, US Masters, April 2000, Augusta National, in a rare American appearance...

**I**t's the final round of the 1997 Crowns tournament at the historic Japanese coastal town of Nagoya. world No1 Greg Norman and Japanese icon Masashi 'Jumbo' Ozaki are fighting it out for the title and a first prize of 21.6 million yen.

Thousands of Ozaki loyalists are swamping the fairways to catch a glimpse of their ageing hero, who had defined Japanese golf since turning professional 27 years earlier. Despite being a regular tournament winner for a quarter of a century, Jumbo's achievements were treated with little more than contempt outside Japan. Being paired with the Great White Shark on the final day provides an opportunity to prove that he is a genuine force worthy of his lofty top 10 world ranking.

Approaching his ball, which is lying in an awkward spot just off the fairway, overnight leader Ozaki stubs out yet another cigarette and grabs the driver. Fortune favours the brave and all that. However, after addressing the ball with the big fella, Ozaki, whose shaggy mullet makes Pat Sharp look like a fashion icon, has a change of heart and plumps for an iron. Norman recoils in anger.

The world's top golfer is convinced that Ozaki has pulled a fast one, claiming that his rival has used the driver to press down the grass behind the ball to improve his lie before switching clubs. For Norman, the scenario has an all too familiar whiff of subterfuge. Three years previously the Australian superstar had accused Ozaki of pulling the same stunt at a tournament at the Tomei Country Club, but the local Japanese rules committee opted to turn a blind eye. Lightning was to strike twice as the incident was once again glossed over, and Ozaki went on to lift the trophy with Norman four strokes back in third.

Kazuhiko Muto, who was one of the few Japanese writers to report the incident, said at the time: "There is a saying in Japan: 'You place a lid over a smelling pot...'"

Born in January 1947, Masashi Ozaki is the eldest of three brothers from the Kaifu District of Tokushima, who were brought up on a provincial farm by an 'easy-going mother and severe father' in a country decimated by the Second World War.

From an early age the patriotic Ozaki resolved to make something of his life. He excelled at sport as a youth, becoming the star pitcher for the Tokushima Kainan High School team who became national champions. This elevated him to the kind of status reserved for the

quarterback of a U.S national champion college football team.

Upon leaving, he played professionally for the Nishi-Nippon Railroad Lions between 1965 and 1967, but the following year he picked up a golf club for the first time after being introduced to the game by the golf-mad manager of the team. It changed his life dramatically.

Ozaki discovered, without the aid of a single golf lesson, that he could larrup the ball a country mile, and quickly became good enough to turn pro. By the end of 1971, he'd already won five events on the Japanese Tour, capturing the imagination of a public gradually becoming besotted with golf. Nearly a hundred titles and several billion yen followed, making Ozaki the most successful Japanese golfer ever. However, there is so much more to the story.

A mysterious, private character who surrounded himself with henchmen, Jumbo, so named because of the power he generated from the tee, became an iconic figure who looked remarkably 'un-Japanese' with his bizarre barnet and stylish attire.

A perfectionist who even enjoyed chart success with a No1 hit in the late 80s, Ozaki admitted a decade ago: "From the start I wanted to look good, wear good clothes and be in the spotlight."

"He is the Arnold Palmer of Japan," said Sadao Iwata, the country's best-known television golf commentator, in 1997. "Golfers here dress like him, buy the equipment he plays, smoke the same brand of cigarettes."

However, for years Ozaki was dogged by rumours that he cheated his way to success. Anyone given the moniker 'foot wedge' in certain circles obviously carries with them a hefty weight of suspicion. There were also accusations that Ozaki was using a 'hot' ball that flew longer than normal and curved right or left at his command; he was still out-driving players half his age when well into his 50s.

So what gave rise to the suspicions? With his piercing eyes and reputed links with the mafia, the chain-smoking Ozaki could fix you with a stare that seemed to suggest that you'd burgled his house and taken his kids hostage.

Ozaki polarised opinion like Marmite. Players who shared a fairway with him on the Japanese Tour remain convinced that Ozaki was a bona fide golfer; a star of some repute. For them, any accusations directed towards Jumbo were borne out of jealousy.

Ozaki's inclusion in the world's top 10 for so many years rankled

with the golfing community Stateside who insisted that he was nothing but a flat-track bully content to accumulate masses of ranking points in relatively uncompetitive surrounds rather than risk his reputation in America. After all, how could a man whose best ever finish at a major was a tie for sixth at the 1989 U.S Open be a regular fixture towards the top of the world rankings for almost a decade? Was this barrel-chested powerhouse just a big fish in a small pond who took advantage of some bizarre foibles in the ranking system, or was he the real deal?

One of Ozaki's staunchest supporters is Todd Hamilton, who eked out a living on the Japanese Tour before finding fame and fortune with his Open victory in 2004. "He's unbelievable, a big hitter with a fantastic short game," said Hamilton in 1998, when Ozaki remained entrenched in the world's top 10 at the age of 51. "Guys from the States wonder why he's ranked so high, but you don't see many of the famous players beating him when they play here. He makes putts Nicklaus used to make, the ones to keep a round going."

However, in the same *Sports Illustrated* interview, an un-named American pro fighting to keep his PGA Tour card, said, in reference to Jumbo's top 10 ranking: "No way is Jumbo better than Mark O'Meara or Steve Elkington....or me!"

As well as rumours of lie manipulations and using balls that travelled inter-planetary distances, there were also accusations that Ozaki was using clubs that flagrantly transgressed the rules.

During a celebrity match on Japanese TV at the tail end of 1989, the legendary Jack Nicklaus was staggered to see Ozaki regularly pummel the ball a full 90 yards beyond him from the tee. After all, when he locked horns with Ozaki 12 months earlier there were just inches between them.

In a New York Times interview in 1990, Nicklaus recalled: "On one par-five I hit a good drive, a two-iron and a wedge to the green. Jumbo reached it with a driver and an eight-iron. I finally turned to him and said, 'What are you using?'"

Ozaki's 'Professional Weapon' was the Jumbo Driver; a battering ram of a club with a graphite shaft and metal head. Cynics argued that the club was illegal as Ozaki was unwilling to disclose the components of the head other than 'it's very much like steel'.

However, Nicklaus and one of his contemporaries, Ray Floyd, were soon using the beast. At the Masters in 1990 both players were in contention from the start, with Floyd coming within a whisker of pulling off a shock victory before losing in a playoff to reigning champion Nick Faldo. On the second hole of the third round, Floyd's drive to the 550-yard par five soared and bounced some 400 yards down the fairway. Not bad for a 47-year-old.

Despite using equipment that was ahead of its time, Ozaki still struggled to compete on the rare occasions he left Japanese shores. His most impressive victory outside Japan is the lightly regarded New Zealand PGA way back in 1972.

While a popular Stateside view is that he was at best not good

**SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS**

**Leading money winner in Japan:**

- 1973, 1974, 1977, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998.
- 1973** Eighth at US Masters
- 1989** Sixth at US Open

enough or at worst a cheat, another theory put forward is that Ozaki, like many Japanese men, suffered from 'Doting Mother Syndrome'. Ayako Okamoto, the Hall of Fame Japanese pro who won 17 tournaments on the LPGA Tour, has argued that some players in her homeland are so spoiled that they can't function on their own. And Ozaki himself once admitted: "When I get in that atmosphere, I don't get the urge to win as strongly. It's too bad I wasn't born there (America) so I could feel the same fire in me."

Despite his celebrity status, Ozaki craved the intimacy of a private family life. He lives in a palatial walled estate just outside Tokyo with his wife, Yoshiko, and their three children. He has a backyard driving range and, at the height of his powers, he owned a Ferrari, a Lamborghini, a Maserati and three Rolls-Royces. He also reads travel books, plays guitar, collects instruments and is interested in wine and bonsai – the traditional Japanese style gardening.

Nevertheless, there are rumours of a more sinister side to the Japanese hero. In 1987 Japan's biggest newspaper, Yomiuri Shimbun, published photos of Jumbo at a birthday party for Susumu Ishii, the alleged leader of Inagawa-kai, one of the country's biggest and most notorious criminal gangs. Yomiuri reported that Ozaki had met the eldest son of the gang's founder, Chihiro Inagawa, in Hawaii in the late '70s. It was subsequently claimed that Jumbo was entertained by Inagawa-kai's top executives, played golf with them and even dished out lessons. Four days after the Yomiuri article appeared, the Japanese Tour officially warned Ozaki.

Despite being the richest Japanese golfer of all time, Ozaki also suffered serious money problems during the recession in his homeland in the early 90s when it is rumoured he lost millions in real estate investments.

He subsequently signed an equipment deal with little-known World One in 1997, estimated to be as high as \$200 million over five years, to help relieve his stricken finances. However, in October 2005 Ozaki was forced to file for bankruptcy with debts totalling 1.6 billion yen.

The 61-year-old has struggled to eke out a living on the circuit ever since – his last win was at the 2002 ANA Open. But, despite failing to win a major or prove himself in the States in a career many regard as being unfulfilled, he remains proud of his achievements.

He told Japan Today in 2003: "The only thing that ever interested me was being No1 in Japan. The age I grew up in after the War was a time when Japan was trying to rebuild. It was a time when people were only thinking about Japan and weren't concerned about anything outside the country.

"People wondered why I never went to America, but I never really gave it much thought. Everything I do is geared to being the top player in Japan. I've never set my targets on anything else."

He was never short of confidence in his prime, and even as late as 2003 he said: "(Younger Japanese players) are no match for Tiger Woods. He is much stronger physically and is much better looking. So Japan still needs me for that challenge!" **[GP]**

**“ALL THAT EVER INTERESTED ME WAS BEING NUMBER ONE BACK IN JAPAN”**



'Foot wedge or lob wedge boss...'



'I WIN!'



'I WIN AGAIN!'

And back again in 1999 in a medium-rare appearance

