

Andalucía

Costa del

Golf

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Wounds start to heal for Spanish golf

The number of licences has gone up for the first time since 2010, with Andalucía leading the pack **P2&3**



The number of licences has gone up this year for the first time in ten years. SALVADOR SALAS

Spanish golf is on the mend after a decade in freefall

The number of licences has risen for the first time since 2010, with Andalucía leading the growth, although the sector is still waiting for improvements such as a drop in the rate of IVA

Spanish golf has started this year with 271,470 federated players. This means 300, or 0.1 per cent, more licences than at the beginning of 2019, and it has broken a period of nine consecutive years in which the numbers dropped. That was between 2010 and 2018, coinciding in part with the economic crisis.

The sector has reasons to feel optimistic. The negative trend started to reverse in 2013 when the drop in licence numbers reached its maximum, specifically six per cent. In the following years, the drop did no more than recover lost ground before starting to grow again last year.

In 1990 there were 45,000 golf players in Spain, counting professionals and federated members. The number passed 100,000 in 1996. Years later, in 2002, it broke the 200,000 bar-

ALBERTO GÓMEZ





Francisco Salado and Juanma Moreno, at a promotional event at Fitur. SALVADOR SALAS



Photo of the Open de España on the Costa del Sol. EFE

THE PANORAMA OF GOLF IN SPAIN

History

1990: There were 45,000 registered players in Spain.

2002: The barrier of 200,000 licences was broken for the first time.

2010: This was the best year for Spanish golf, with 338,588 federated players.

2019: Spanish golf ended the year with 271,470 licences.

The regions

Growth: Eight regions have begun the year with an increase in the number of licences. The highest number in 2019 was in Andalucía, with an increase of 508 federated players (1.15 per cent more).

Drop: Catalonia and Castilla León were the regions with the biggest drop in federated players, with 559 and 220 fewer licences, respectively.

Women's golf

Women: The number of licences is currently more than 76,000, which represents 28.2 per cent of the total. Of these women, 42,803 are over the age of 50.

Young people

Under-16s: At present there are 23,894 players under the age of 16, which is 7.6 per cent more than in 2015. In the under-21 age group there are 34,374 federated players.

rier and reached more than 300,000 in 2006. The peak came in 2010 with 338,588 licences, and then the numbers started to drop. This process is now slowing down, with more than 271,000 federated players.

In 2015, every region of Spain reported a drop in the numbers of licences, but eight of them ended 2019 on a positive note. In absolute terms Madrid, with 82,993 federated players, represents 30.5 per cent of the country's licences, followed by Andalucía with 44,308 and Catalonia with 28,137, representing 16.3 and 10.3 per cent of the total, respectively. The Comunidad Valenciana (19,245), Basque Country (17,187), Castilla y León (13,005) and Galicia (10,498) are the other regions with more than 10,000 federated players.

The region where the number

of licences increased the most in 2019 was Andalucía, with 508 more players (up 1.15 per cent), followed by Madrid with 463, an increase of 0.56 per cent. At present there are more than 76,000 women's licences, which is 28.2 per cent of the total number of golf licences in Spain.

There are also reasons for optimism when analysing the statistics for young players, as there are 23,894 - of these under the age of 16 and over 34,000 under 21. In percentage terms, these figures represent 8.8 and 12.7 per cent of the total federated players, respectively. In 2015 there were 21,530 under-16s, so in the past five years this figure has increased by 7.6 per cent.

At a competitive level, Spanish golf is also showing what it is made of. In addition to the wins by Jon Rahm, Pablo Larrazabal and Ser-

gio García, Rafael Cabrera-Bello is also in a good position, ending the season high in the classification. Other Spanish players had success on different tours, such as Miguel Ángel Jiménez on the Champions Tour. Carlota Ciganda and Azahara Muñoz also played a decisive role in the European victory in the Solheim Cup against the USA.

The successes by Spanish golfers, however, have still not been reflected in terms of federated players. Why is that? Basically, golf is not a simple sport. Because

There are now more than 23,000 federated players under the age of 16

of the technical complexity it takes time to learn the basic rules and how to use the clubs. It can take up to five hours to play 18 holes, although at present there are plenty of 'pitch and putt' courses, which are smaller and make a round shorter and more attractive.

The prejudices which have plagued golf for decades, such as its reputation as being a sport for the wealthy, still continue to cause damage even though it only costs around 70 euros to become a federated player and nine holes can

Golf still has a reputation as a sport for the wealthy and that is damaging

be played on a public course for 15 euros. Notwithstanding this, golf still has more federated players than tennis, swimming, judo, handball, cycling and climbing.

Andalucía is home to 21 per cent of all the courses in Spain, ahead of Madrid, Catalonia and the Comunidad Valenciana. The course with the highest number of federated players in Spain is the Centro de Tecnificación, with more than 6,000, followed by the Club de Campo Villa de Madrid and the Club de Golf Olivar de la Hinojosa.

The national and regional federations have spent months putting together programmes to encourage people to take up this sport, as a way of licking its wounds caused by the economic crisis and the increase in IVA - one of the sector's main pending issues with the government.

"The reduction in IVA is essential for the sector and we'll continue to demand it"

Gonzaga Escauriaza President of the Federación Española de Golf

The head of the RFEG says the Solheim Cup would be "a turning point for golf tourism" on the Costa

ALBERTO GÓMEZ

He says that if the Costa del Sol is chosen to host the Solheim Cup it will be "a turning point" for women's golf and golf tourism in the area. The president of the Real Federación Española de Golf (RFEG), Gonzaga Escauriaza, knows what he is talking about. Every two years this event, which is similar to the Ryder Cup, attracts thousands of visitors and is followed by millions of people on television. The man who holds the highest position in federative golf also believes the Andalusian government "has been and still is" the most active in promoting the sport and the destination through professional tournaments, more so even than Madrid and Catalonia.

Amid a climate of moderate optimism due to the slight increase in the number of licences compared with previous years, slowing down a chronic decrease which began a decade ago, in this interview Escauriaza analyses the professional challenges that lie ahead, with the Olympic Games on the horizon, and applauds the work of Jon Rahm, the world number two, in making this sport even more popular in Spain.

—What is the situation regarding golf in Spain at the moment?

—I would say that this is an extraordinary moment in terms of competitive golf, with some great players and many triumphs at an amateur as well as a professional level.

—How do you feel about the increase in federated players after years of falling numbers in Spain?

—It is very good news that, after many years with negative figures, 2019 was positive. It was only a small increase, but it is positive. We hope it continues that way.

—Why do you think it is so hard for golf to shake off its label as an elitist sport?

—I believe the perception of golf has changed a great deal in re-

cent years and we are working so it is seen as a sport like any other, but with the advantage of being extraordinarily good for health.

—How can the arrival on the scene of somebody like Jon Rahm attract more players and increase the popularity of golf?

—Spanish golf has been very fortunate to have some fantastic champions, starting with Seve Ballesteros, then José María Olazabal, and now Jon Rahm. They have all, to a greater or lesser extent, contributed to the popularity of Spanish golf, and Jon is really giving us something to enjoy these days!

—What is your opinion of the visibility of women's golf? How much further does it have to go? The latest win at the Solheim Cup, with Carlota Ciganda and Azahara Muñoz playing, was hardly mentioned in the news.

—Spanish women's golf is in great shape, better than ever before. We constantly have two players in the Solheim Cup, the women's version of the Ryder Cup, and we have several players studying and competing in the USA. You also have to remember the three silver medals for the ladies, in the girls and senior categories, in 2019 and we shouldn't forget what Macarena Campomanes achieved this year, becoming number one in the world senior women's ranking and third in the Mid-Amateur.

—Will the Open de España definitely be taking place this year?

—This year, yes. It will be held at the Club de Campo Villa de Madrid from 15 to 18 October.

—Following the economic crisis, are the administrations seeing professional championships as a way of attracting tourism again?

—Before 2008, the administrations were very committed to golf. Now they are gradually starting to be so again, for instance re-



Escauriaza, in his office at the Real Federación Española de Golf. SUR

cently with the Road to Mallorca for the Challenge final. But Andalucía has been, and still is, the most active.

—The reduction in the rate of IVA continues to be a priority demand for the sector. What has the Federation been doing to reverse the increase approved by the government in 2012?

—We are always working to obtain benefits for golf in general and

"Andalucía is the region with the strongest commitment to professional tournaments"

Spanish and foreign golf tourism in particular. The issue of IVA is an extremely important one and we will not stop demanding the reduction because we consider it essential.

—In Spain, is golf considered more a sport or a tourist activity?

—Golf in Spain is a very big sport, practised by many Spanish people and with major champions. In addition to that, Spain is a golf tourism destination of extraordinary quality. The two are not incompatible, luckily.

—How do you predict the Spanish players will do in the Olympic Games and how motivated are they to do well in this tournament?

—We have high expectations for the Olympic Games in Tokyo, of the men and the women. Jon

Rahm, Rafa Cabrera-Bello and Sergio García could well win a medal and Carlota Ciganda and Azahara Muñoz also have strong possibilities. I believe they are motivated and will do well, or at least they will try their best to do so.

—What do you think about the possibility of the Solheim Cup being held on the Costa del Sol, specifically, if all goes as planned, at a course in Marbella?

—It is fantastic news and will be a turning point for women's golf in Spain and for golf tourism on the Costa del Sol and the rest of the country. It is a showcase for tourism as well as a top-level competition which is watched on television every two years by millions of people all over the world. It is very important.

Affects of **coronavirus** being felt on the Road to Tokyo

ALBERTO GÓMEZ /
COSTA DEL GOLF

In February the LPGA announced the cancellation of three important championships in Thailand and Singapore because of concerns over the spread of coronavirus. The tournaments were due to take place between 20 and 23 February in the town of Pattaya, Thailand, and two between 27 February and 1 March in Singapore.

The health authorities in Singapore have detected dozens of cases of the coronavirus, many of whom were infected locally, while in Thailand more than 30 patients had been infected by this virus before the announcement of the cancellation. In south-east Asia the virus has spread through Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Cambodia.

The Asian Tour's Royal Cup (12-15 March) was postponed indefinitely this week, as well as three events on the European Tour. The remaining two European Tour events in Nairobi (5-8 March) and Prague (20-23 August) have been cancelled.

"Our priority is the health and safety of our players, fans and all those who work at the events," said the association, which had already announced the cancellation of a tournament in the Chinese province of Hunan.

Some major trade fairs and sports events do seem to be going ahead (albeit delayed), such as the aviation fair in Singapore, the biggest in Asia, even though many manufacturers have decided not to attend. Some, like the ITB in Berlin, one of the biggest tourism fairs in the world, have been cancelled because of possible contagion.

There is also uncertainty about the Olympic Games. The Road to Tokyo, the slogan chosen by numerous sports organisations for their classification processes, has become littered with stones because of this virus, which is now present in around 50 countries. The suspension of the United Arab Emirates Tour, after two participants tested positive, is the latest consequence in the sports calendar of the spread of the virus.

Competitions are moving from country to country from one month to another in the search for 'safe' destinations which will enable golfers to take part in qualifying and preparatory tournaments for the Olympics with as little disruption as possible.

Matches taking place behind closed doors, spectators wearing masks, cancelled flights, closed borders... "It is adding complexity to the life of the federations," said Juan Antonio Samaranch, the vice-president of the IOC, about a sporting calendar which has been

Several golf tournaments have now been cancelled while

the world continues to wonder about Tokyo, where the Olympics are due to take place in July



A woman walks past the stadium in Tokyo. EFE



The organisers of the Olympic Games have not yet made any decision. EFE

upended. While it is trying to make plans, the million-dollar question remains: Will it be possible for the Olympics to take place?

The organisers and the IOC say they are continuing to work on preparing the Games and have not thought about cancelling them or changing the date, but they are "alert" regarding what may happen "and obviously worried", said Samaranch. A decision about the Olympics will eventually be taken and will "depend on what the health authorities say".

More than 10,000 people are expected to take part in the Olympic Games, with their corresponding teams, federations, assistants and referees, as well as thousands of

"Our players' safety is our priority," insist the organisers of the Ladies Professional Golf Association

fans and tourists who are going specifically for the event.

The suspension of football matches in the Japanese League until 15 March, the postponement of

The IOC has not changed the date or venue for the Olympics but is "obviously concerned"

the training for volunteers for the Olympics and the temporary closure of all schools to contain the virus do not bode well in a country which is due to host the Games in less than five months.

Amid all the concern and speculation, tennis star Rafael Nadal was in Mexico, where he played and won the Acapulco tournament: "Let's hope they find a remedy and all this fear comes to an end. Not just for the Olympic Games, but for humanity," he said.

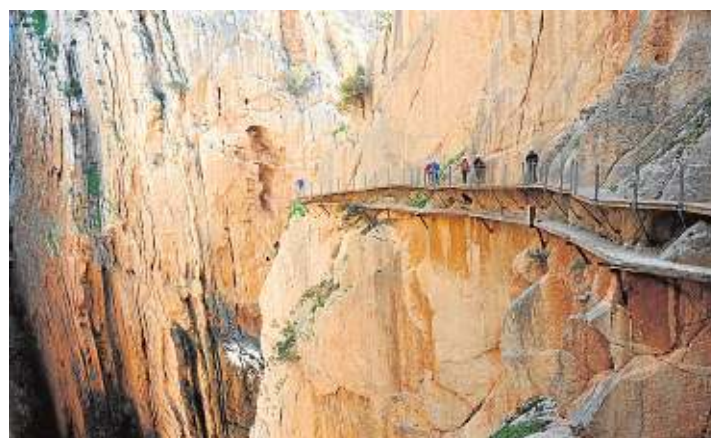


Views from the
Caminito del Rey.
REUTERS

Malaga. The best time of year for rural tourism in the province

Attractions. The Caminito del Rey in Álora and the Dólmenes de Antequera are just two of the sites which have boosted interest in the northern part of Malaga province

ALEJANDRO DÍAZ



After the historic consolidation of the Costa del Golf as a worldwide tourist attraction some years ago, 2015 saw the emergence of another, the Caminito del Rey, which is situated between the municipalities of Álora, Antequera, Ardales and Valle de Abdalajís.

Dating back to 1921, this was completely reformed in 2014 and is now renowned as “one of the world’s most impressive walkways,” due to its narrow paths 100 metres above the ground and over the Desfiladero de los Gaitanes gorge. Since its inauguration it has been visited by hundreds of thousands of people and has become one of the most-featured attractions, appearing in reports and articles in the most prestigious and widely-read newspapers, magazines and websites on the planet.

Parallel to the opening of the Caminito, rural tourism in this area received a further boost when the Dolmens of Antequera were classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The complex includes the megalithic constructions, El Torcal and the Peña de los Enamorados (otherwise known as Lov-



The Dólmenes de Antequera, World Heritage Site. **SUR**



Antequera, connected with the high-speed railway. **REUTERS**



A golf course in Antequera. **SUR**

ers' Rock). The combination of these two historical and cultural landmarks, which are not far from each other, has consolidated rural tourism as one of the strengths of Malaga province.

Although the inland municipalities which are becoming popular with tourists do not have the same number of golf courses as the coast, they do have facilities so visitors can practise this sport. It means they can enjoy the tourist attractions and play golf as well, without having to travel down to the coast.

Antequera is the biggest municipality in Malaga province and a large part of it consists of an extensive and very fertile plain, where olive trees and cereal crops predominate. It is surrounded by the El Torcal and Arco Calizo Central mountain ranges, and the famous Lovers' Rock rises majestically above the flat terrain.

There are numerous myths and legends about this rock, and this and the other attractions make Antequera a unique destination which is especially suitable for a family holiday.

The classification as a World Heritage Site includes not only

the three megalithic monuments of Menga, Viera and El Romeral, but also Lovers' Rock, the mountain with a human profile which can be seen from a long way away as you approach Antequera, and the beauty spot of El Torcal de Antequera, with its remarkable rock formations.

The Dólmenes de Antequera archaeological complex is at the entrance to the town from Malaga and Granada, so it is easy to find. El Torcal, however, is about 20 kilometres away, on the road towards Villanueva de la Concepción. The best way to get to El Torcal after visiting the dolmens is to go back down to-

wards the industrial estate and, at the first roundabout, turn left onto the bypass. Follow this all the way to La Verónica roundabout, where there is a Galp petrol station and a small chapel, and from there head in the Antequera direction and then follow the signs for Ronda Intermedia, Avenida de Capuchinos and Avenida de la Legión, which is where the road to El Torcal starts. The experience is worth the extra journey.

Tourism Municipality

In February, the town of Antequera was designated a Tourism Municipality of Andalucía by the regional government in recognition of the fact that it is an outstanding place to visit and one which receives a high volume of visitors at certain times of year. Statistics show that 234,226 people went to El Torcal over a 30-day period last year. This figure is five times higher than the local population, which is 41,927 inhabitants.

There are 2,046 beds available in registered tourist accommodation in Antequera, and excellent facilities for those who enjoy playing golf.

The Junta takes a step forward in approving a tourism plan for Jaén

The city will benefit from 500,000 euros of investment, which will be financed equally by the regional government and the local town hall

COSTA DEL GOLF

MALAGA. The permanent committee of the Andalusian Tourism Council, which is an associate body of the Junta de Andalucía's Ministry of Tourism, Regeneration, Justice and Local Administration, has now issued a favourable report with regard to Jaén city's Large Town Tourism Plan. The next step will be to finalise the details and then the definitive authorisation should be signed before June.

Jaén's 'Plan Turístico de Grandes Ciudades' will involve 500,000 euros of investment, and this will be financed equally by the Junta de Andalucía and Jaén council. The Plan will be in force for four years.

"This is very good news for Jaén," said the Junta's local delegate for Tourism, Regeneration, Justice and Local Administration, Raquel Morales, who added that the collaboration between the regional government and the local town hall "will bring to fruition a project which is very necessary to boost and modernise tourism in the city".

She also explained that one of the aims of the plan is to improve quality in the tourism sector, "something to which the Ministry is very committed".

Meanwhile, José Miguel

Higueras, Jaén's councillor for Culture and Tourism, described this as "great news, and the result of good collaboration between administrations and the participation of agents in the sector. We are talking about a very positive advance for the city, especially as the investment will be made over the next two or three years," he said.

Raquel Morales explained that the general objectives of the plan are to improve tourism resources, adapt the urban area to tourist use by making it more accessible to people with disabilities, increase quality in services for tourists, improve the existing tourism product and create new products based on the innovative use of resources.

The plan will also enable action to be taken to raise awareness among the local population and get people and local agents involved in creating a culture of quality and making the tourism sector in the city more competitive.

"This is an ambitious project which will strengthen the destination and improve the competitiveness of the tourist facilities in Jaén and, indeed, in the whole of Andalucía," said Raquel Morales.

The Tourism Council is working in accordance with a decree which became law in Andalucía in 2016, encouraging large towns and cities in the region to draw up special tourism plans.

The initiative aims to assist the promotion and development of tourism in towns in Andalucía with more than 100,000 inhabitants.



The cathedral is one of the attractions of Jaén city. **AFP**

Tonnes of talent from Malaga

Azahara Muñoz and Noemí Jiménez are among Spain's leading women on professional and amateur tours

ALBERTO GÓMEZ

Azahara Muñoz started playing golf "by accident" and years afterwards, when she had already become one of the best in the world, she celebrated her first win on the American Tour with a family barbecue. She has none of the delusions of grandeur which are so common among sporting stars, even though she appears in the upper part of the classification every week and has already won more than six million dollars in prize money.

The player from Malaga and twice winner of the Open de España, hates the old cliché that women's golf is for rich girls. In Rio de Janeiro four years ago,

fed up with these attitudes, she didn't hold back in her comments before going on to become the first Spanish golfer to play in the Olympics: "People need to change their tone. Playing golf is cheaper than going out partying. Once it was only played by people who had money, but now you only have to look at the Spanish women who are competing here; none of us come from privileged families. My parents are teachers," she said.

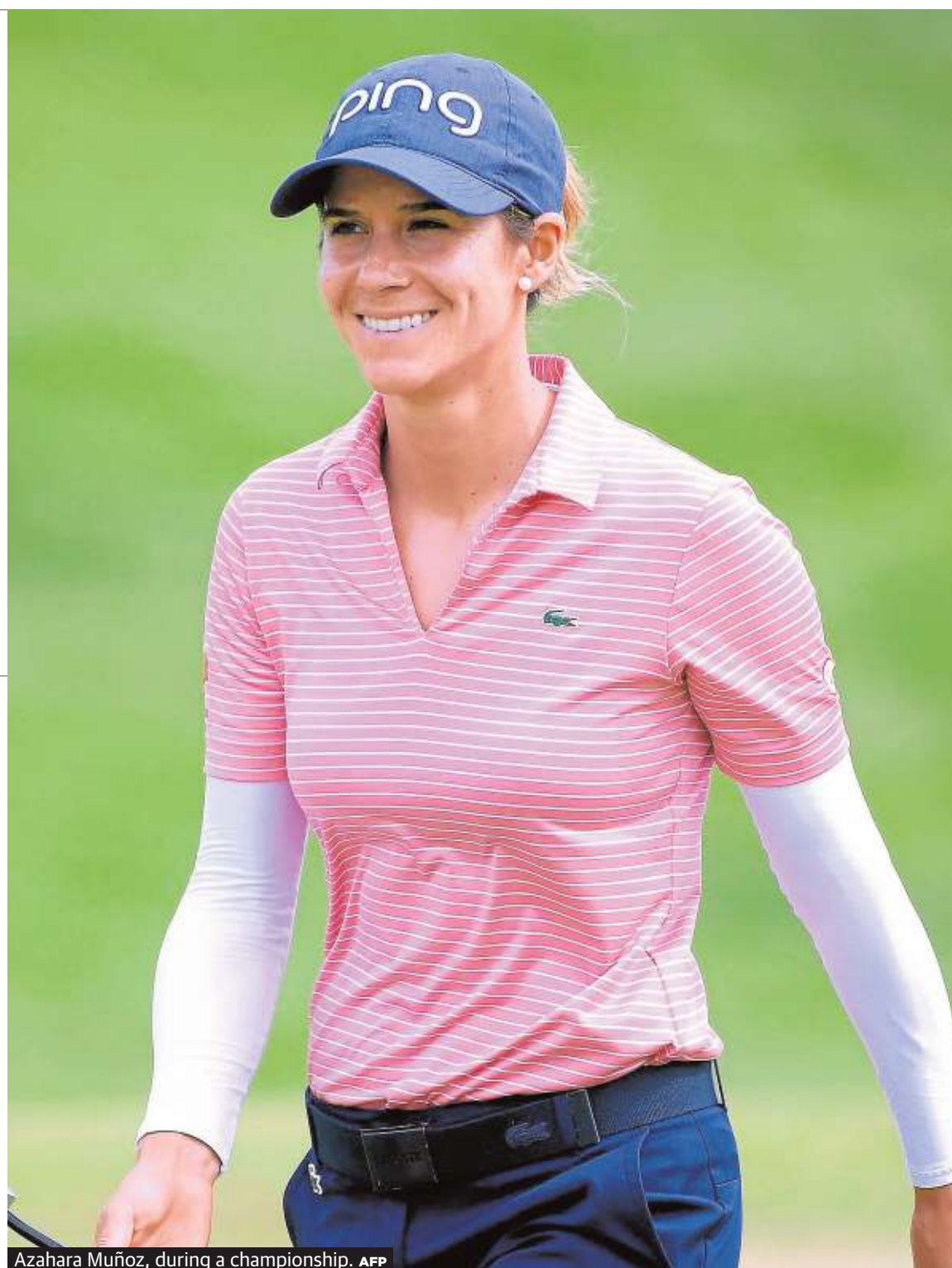
Muñoz alternates between the two tours and has won six titles, including the Sybase Match Championship, one of the most important tournaments in the world, with around 400,000 dollars in prize money.

Muñoz and Carlota Ciganda are the best-known names in women's golf in Spain. Thousands of girls want to be like Azahara. One is Noemí Jiménez, who became an amateur golfer after witnessing her compatriot's first triumphs. Her father is a firefighter and golf monitor and her mother, who is a housewife at present, is a black belt in karate and was a physical trainer for children with Down's Syndrome.

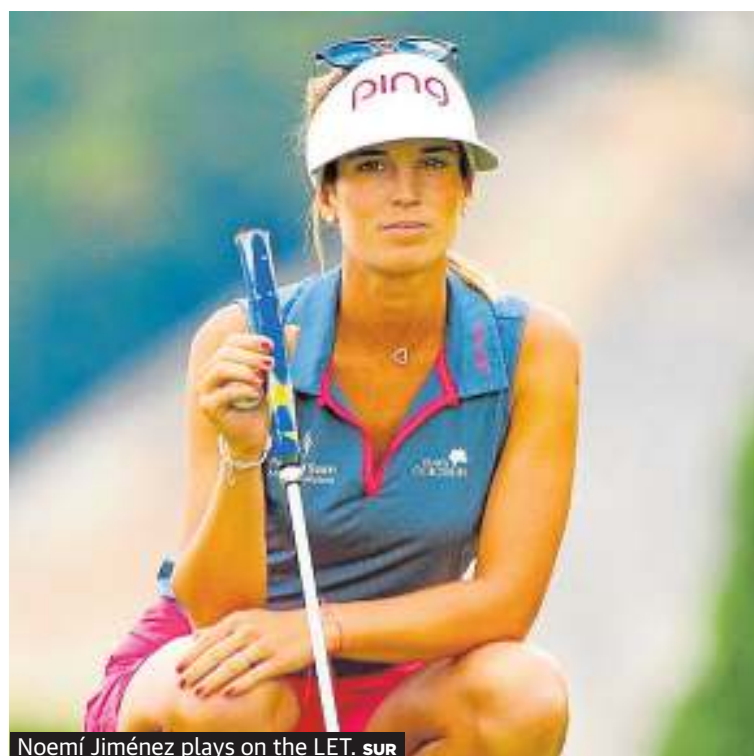
Noemí left home at the age of 16 thanks to a high-performance scholarship which enabled her to train at the Joaquín Blume residence in Madrid and finish her studies in Business and Tourism in the USA.

She is now trying to make a name for herself on the Ladies European Tour. She has been in the top 10 of the European Tour, on which she has played more than 50 tournaments, on three occasions.

She competes in amateur championships while continuing her sports and academic training at the University of South Carolina. Her record includes winning the Campeonato de Madrid in 2016 and the NCAA Re-



Azahara Muñoz, during a championship. AFP



Noemí Jiménez plays on the LET. SUR

Two women players trained in the USA

Although their careers are different, these two golfers have something in common: their trips to the USA, where they are studying or have studied previously.

The universities there offer many more facilities for elite sportsmen and women than those in Europe, there are alternative exam dates when these coincide with tournaments, they organise team competitions and the courses are more complicated.

Although some Spanish universities, such as Malaga, are now taking note, the differences continue to be great and that tips the balance for many women golfers.

gionals in 2017, as well as contributing to Spain's triumph in the under-18s in 2015 and, more recently, the silver medal in the European Championship.

In January she won the Copa Andalucía trophy at Atalaya Golf & Country Club. She ended +1 (73 strokes) on the penultimate day and ended the tourna-

ment with a card of 69 for a total of -8 (280 strokes), four ahead of her nearest challenger.

Clearly she is well-placed to follow in her hero's footsteps.

Costa del
Golf

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