

And the Winner Is...

By: Nathan Crace Date: July 23, 2004

As we find ourselves once again perched upon the precipice of August with the PGA Championship squarely in our sights as the last men's major for the year, 2004 is shaping up to be one of the most exciting years for majors in quite some time (notwithstanding Tiger's 2000 year). Mickelson began by finally breaking through and winning the Masters with a closing flourish. Goosen outlasted the field and Mickelson on the sun-baked linoleum greens at Shinnecock for his second US Open crown. And for the second year in a row, a long shot American won the British Open, setting the career of Todd Hamilton into high gear and handing Ernie Els his second heart-breaking runner-up finish in four months.

So what could make the Major that usually gets the Rodney Dangerfield degree of respect the climatic epicenter of championship golf this year? Here are a few headlines from scenarios that would make for some interesting stories:

A. *"Mickelson Completes Year with Bookend Majors."* Obviously, he has been playing well enough to do so. He followed up the Masters with a gut-wrenching last two holes at the US Open and just shy of a playoff in the British Open. What a way to finish out the year for the man who used to be the best left-handed player to have never won a Major?

B. *"Tiger Breaks Slump at Whistling Straits."* It seems like forever ago that Tiger Woods won a major. Not long ago, he was collecting hardware from the Majors like Jennifer Lopez collects engagement rings. But rest assured, even a win at the PGA won't silence the critics who are sure he'll never "really get out of his slump" until he calls Butch Harmon.

C. *"Lady Luck Finally Shines on Els."* Have you been paying attention to Ernie Els in the Majors this year? He played one of the best final rounds in recent Masters history only to see Mickelson drain his final putt to steal his green jacket away. He was in the thick of the US open until the final round and he lost the British Open in a playoff. Picking Els to win the PGA would not be a bad bet—neither would Mickelson.

D. *"Journeyman No More! Hamilton Goes Back to Back in Majors."* The only thing more improbable than the Ben Curtis title in last year's British Open was the back-to-back long-shot victories of Curtis and Todd Hamilton in this year's British Open. Hamilton obviously has the game to contend and one Major under your proverbial belt makes the next one more comfortable to stomach. Especially if the rest of the field gets aggravated with the "unfair" conditions at Whistling Straits.

But there is one primary difference between this year's PGA Championship and the PGAs gone by that could make for a very interesting four days in August. This year's event is being held on the Straits course at Whistling Straits in Kohler, Wisconsin. Four days of stiff and shifting winds on this Pete Dye masterpiece/monster hard against the bluffs overlooking Lake Michigan could make the Shinnecock debacle look like the TPC at Avenel. The three longest par 4's in major championship history will be in play at Whistling Straits and—barring any torrential downpours—the course will be firm and fast. Dye and course owner Herb Kohler are looking forward to seeing the best players in the world being "tested" on every shot. And for anyone who found themselves deriving guilty pleasures from watching the players in the US Open pulling their hair out over the greens on Long Island, get a tape and record the PGA Championship for future viewing.

Who will walk away with the Wannamaker Trophy is anyone's guess. The smart money would appear to be on Els or Mickelson, but the course conditions could bring out another Todd Hamilton. In addition to course management and ball striking, a great degree of luck will be in play come August. But if you've ever wanted to be one of the sports world's pontificating pundits, I've recently been given a copy of the script from the coverage of the PGA Championship. It may even be accurate right up until the last putt on Sunday afternoon. Read below and amaze your friends with your powers of foresight:

Talking Head Number One: *Well [CO-ANCHOR'S NAME] we will be sure to see some of the greatest shot-making the world has seen here at Whistling Straits this week. I recently spoke with [PLAYER'S NAME] and he says that the course is firm, the greens are fast, and the wind is blowing. And that can only mean one thing: That [ANOTHER PLAYER'S NAME] should be the [NUMBER] player to win his [NUMBER] major here in Kohler, Wisconsin. With his [either SHORT GAME or PUTTING] and his [either ACCURACY or LENGTH] of the tee, no other player in the field has more of an advantage here than [PLAYER'S NAME].*

Talking Head Number Two: *That may be true [CO-ANCHOR'S NAME], but you can't count out [ANOTHER PLAYER'S NAME] or [YET ANOTHER PLAYER'S NAME TO C.Y.A] following the [TOURNAMENT EARLIER IN THE YEAR] and the [OTHER TOURNAMENT FROM EARLIER IN THE YEAR]. And considering what [YET ANOTHER PLAYER'S NAME] had to go through earlier in the season with [OBSCURE ANECDOTE REFERENCING SAID PLAYER'S PERSONAL LIFE] it would be heart-warming for the fans to see him garner his [NUMBER] major.*

You think I'm kidding, but with the Whistling Straits hosting the PGA Championship, anything could happen this year and the type of script that seems like mindless dribble at other tournaments throughout the year may prove to be the safest play this August. Whatever the result, I for one look forward to seeing the world's best tested—and aggravated—once again. I get tired of seeing winning scores like [OBSCENE NUMBER OF STROKES UNDER PAR] at the [REGULAR TOUR EVENT CAKEWALK] and [OTHER REGULAR TOUR EVENT CAKEWALK]. But when it's all said and done, I guarantee that [PLAYER'S NAME] will have his [NUMBER] piece of Major hardware to add to his [MANTLE or TROPHY CASE].

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2004.