

Ryder Cup: Red, White & Bluegrass*By: Nathan Crace Date: August 14, 2008*

Some wonder why anyone would want to spend time watching the Ryder Cup this year when the world's number one golfer will be at home tending to a bum knee instead of carving up the competition at Valhalla? I can think of a few reasons....One is that the Euros will bring the best player on the planet with two knees: the winner of three of the last six majors (that's 50% for those counting at home). The likable Irishman Padraig Harrington is riding a wave coming into the Ryder Cup and could very well go on a tear if he keeps playing the way he has thus far. Of course, you'll have to deal with Sergio Garcia too. With all due respect to his game (a very good combination of swing and tenacity), I wonder who or what he will blame if he doesn't play well this time around? The flagsticks? The weather? The Derby Pie for dessert that was too rich for his palette?

As far as the American "team" not playing as one, I don't see that as being a problem this year. I'm not convinced it was as much of a problem in past years as the fact that the Ryder Cup is late in the season and the travel alone of a PGA Tour season will wear a guy out by the time the Cup rolls around every two years. This year's team features a good blend of youth and experience—and even some "youthful experience" in the form of winner Anthony Kim. Players like Kim can electrify a gallery and make the most of the home course advantage. Speaking of home course advantage, you have Kentucky native Kenny Perry who made no bones about the fact that his 2008 schedule was all about making the Ryder Cup team and play in his home state. He took heat from the media about passing on the US Open and British Open as a result, but Perry may have the last laugh once the Ryder Cup is wrapped up this year.

By my count, four of the eight US team members thus far have won a major championship and at least one of the others probably should have by now. And then there's Boo Weekly who is as much a crowd favorite as John Daly—but for all the right reasons. Even the British Open crowds have taken a liking to Boo's easy demeanor that slyly covers a truckload of talent. I'm curious to see whom Captain Azinger picks to round out the team (which won't be decided until after this column has gone to press). He has hinted that he won't necessarily stick to the PGA Tour if someone else gets hot in the weeks leading up to decision time. Most took that as a call to the Nationwide Tour players for the chance of a lifetime....but I wonder if that might also apply to the Champions Tour? Would it be beyond the realm of possibility for Jay Haas or Scott Hoch to light it up the next few weeks and be asked to step up to the plate in September for the Americans?

Lastly, I'll be watching the Ryder Cup for a couple of selfish reasons. The Ryder Cup will be played at Valhalla in Louisville, Kentucky. I was born in Louisville and raised just across the Ohio River in Charlestown, Indiana. According to Google Earth, it's only 17.68 miles as the crow flies—but crows don't have to deal with traffic on the Watterson Expressway and only three bridges to get across the river from Indiana into Louisville. As a senior in high school, I attended a "caddie clinic" at Valhalla my senior year because I wanted to caddie that upcoming summer (and I had heard from reputable sources that caddies could play on Monday afternoons when the course was closed). To me, that would have been better than being paid to caddie or any tips! So about ten or so of us walked down the 1st fairway from the tee with the caddie master to the landing area and learned how to give a yardage the proper way, how to replace a divot, and how to stay ahead of the players. The problem was, I skipped a golf team practice to make the clinic and my coach forced me to decide between playing on the team my fourth and final year or being a caddie. So the only time I have actually been on the course itself was that day on the 1st fairway and I remember that at the time all you could see from the course was one house way off on a distant hill.

In fact, Valhalla is known as the course that signaled an important turning point in the career of Jack Nicklaus as a golf course architect. Before that time, he had been criticized for making courses that pandered too much to development, featured exaggerated moonscape mounding and numerous dogleg right holes that favored a fade (much like Nicklaus's ball flight), and were simply too expensive and ostentatious. At Valhalla, however, the softer side of Nicklaus made itself known. For starters, the original owner (not the PGA Tour, which bought the course in 2000) was a businessman from Louisville named Dwight Gahn who wanted a "golf only" venue with no houses around it and plenty of room to stretch out. He issued such an edict to Nicklaus and Valhalla opened to rave reviews in 1986. The object of the course was not to drive real estate sales, but to be a solid test of golf.

The course has changed since then as courses do to accommodate three majors and now the Ryder Cup, but many of the Valhalla trademarks still remain. What has changed is the distance...and the par. According to Nicklaus, Valhalla was a 7,167 yard par 72 for the 2000 PGA Championship. Following Nicklaus's tweaking leading up the Ryder Cup, the course will play as a par 71 of 7,496 yards when the Euros come to town! There are three par-4 holes of 500 yards or more! Remember the old days when a par-5 was anything over 475 yards?

So I'll be watching (or at least DVR'ing) the Ryder Cup this year for a number of reasons and wishing the best of luck to the Americans and the people of "Kentuckiana"—what we natives call the combined Louisville Metro area and the neighboring counties across the river in Indiana. If you go to the Ryder Cup, here's a tip from a native: The best way to tell if someone is from Louisville is to ask him or her how to pronounce it. Anything other than "Loo-a-vuhl" is a sure sign they didn't grow up there and "Louey-ville" is totally unacceptable. Kentucky's new state slogan is "Unbridled Spirit." I just hope the American team shows up with that same spirit when they roll into "Loo-a-vuhl" in September.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Assoc. of America 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 his archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know or email him at nathan@watermarkgolf.com. Copyright 2008.