

The (Ryder) Cup Runneth Over!

By: Nathan Grace Date: August 28, 2006

It's that time of year again. The kids are heading back to school. Cooler temperatures are around the corner. Football fans are warming up their tailgates. And Ryder Cup teams are being finalized. Captain Lehman made his final picks: Stewart Cink (#12 in the final standings) and Scott Verplank (#20 in the final standings). I'm sure some will want to make a point of the questionable pick of the 20th player to the team, though Cink has been a proven contender—and 12 is closer to 11 than 20. So then, why would the Captain choose to skip over eight other players to name Verplank to the team? First, one must consider the rest of the team.

The top spot, of course, belongs to Tiger Woods. In fact, he has TWICE as many points as Phil Mickelson, who holds the second place in the final team standings. Jim Furyk is in third, followed by Chad Campbell, David Toms, Chris DiMarco, Vaughn Taylor, J.J. Henry, Zach Johnson, and Brett Wetterich. To be honest—and with all due respect to the members who qualified for the team—I was surprised by a lot of the names in the top ten. And I don't think I'm the only person. Furyk, Toms, and DiMarco I would have guessed if I knew nothing else. However, I would have owed you a lunch if we had wagered on who held the #7 spot—or even the #4 spot.

So with a team comprised mainly of such young and unidentifiable members, why would Lehman skip over players such as Davis Love III and Fred Couples to get to Verplank? Even Lehman himself finished at #19! Of course, it would have raised many an eyebrow if he selected himself, not having qualified in the top ten. He could have picked John Daly—at least it would have spiced up the team. He may not have won a point, but I have a feeling that you could say the same about some of the others who played their way onto the team.

How does this happen? Some think it may be the weakest team the United States has fielded since 1989. Only time will tell. About four weeks of time. This is not to say that we will see a shellacking by the Europeans like we did in 2004. But I wouldn't be cleaning off a spot on the mantle at PGA headquarters just yet. Could this be the result of the fact that at this point in time, the most dominant player in the game is an American? Consider this: With the current points formulations and Tiger winning everything he looks at, the team points break down to Tiger...and everyone else. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if between the time I finish this column and it runs in September, he doesn't pick up another win—probably the WGC at Firestone.

There is so much disparity between Tiger's 4,825 points and tenth place Brett Wetterich's 746 points, that it's almost laughable. If some other people were winning just some of the events Tiger has been winning the past two years, then the points would be spread more evenly. There is no bell curve. Perhaps we can adopt a policy of point redistribution? We will take points from the top players (they have enough anyway) and give them to players further down the list in the 20's and 30's. Tiger, Phil, and Jim can give up some points—they have plenty!

I'm a huge supporter of the American team and deeply patriotic—even for a sporting event. And I hope I'm wrong and the Cup comes back from the K Club in Ireland in the hands of Captain Lehman. What concerns me is the recent history of the Ryder Cup and the fact that the other team has players such as Montgomerie, Garcia, Harrington, and Olazabal. Sure we have Tiger, Phil, Jim, David, and Chris, but they can only play one match at a time. And if you listen to the pundits, the Europeans want it more...for whatever reason.

"Why are you so hard on the young guys?" "Why are you so down on the Ryder Cup team?" I can hear it already. It's not that I'm down on anything. But no one reading this column—save the guys on the team and Tom Lehman—can say they weren't surprised by at least one of the names who actually played their way into the Top Ten of the U.S. team standings.

So come the end of September, I'll be watching and pulling for the guys from our side of the pond and hoping for the best. But in the back of my mind, I'll be looking forward to 2008 when the Ryder Cup comes sailing down the Ohio River to Valhalla and my hometown with, hopefully, Captain Larry Nelson at the helm and a more even point distribution and a few more seasoned players on his ship.