

Straits Talk About the Ryder Cup

The Ryder Cup is the overnight success that took 60 years to be noticed. Long a biennial rout of the British PGA by their American counterparts, it took a suggestion by Jack Nicklaus to open the British-Irish side to mainland Europeans to make it a real competition.

Since that happened, and thanks to Seve Ballesteros and his successors, the Ryder Cup has become golf's version of Michigan battling Ohio State on a November Saturday. You don't know what's going to happen, but you know it's going to be good.

From the War by the Shore to the Comeback at Brookline to the Miracle – or Meltdown – at Medinah, the Ryder Cup has been the greatest movable feast in golf. (The Masters, anchored at Augusta National, is unto itself.)

Next year, the Ryder Cup visits Wisconsin. Specifically, Whistling Straits, the vision of Herb Kohler and Pete Dye on the man-made bluff hard by Lake Michigan just north of Sheboygan. The 43rd Ryder Cup will only last three days, from September 25-27, but the entire year will be a celebration of the game and the competition, and the memories will last a lifetime.

The Kohler golf team is ready for the madness.

"The Ryder Cup has opened up a lot of opportunities for leisure travelers who really want to experience that course before the Ryder Cup, see what's going on from a competition standpoint," said Dirk Willis, Kohler's general manager and group director of golf.

"We've got the American Club, a five-star, five-diamond hotel, and we've also got the Inn at Woodlake, a three-diamond hotel, and a new product at the Inn at Woodlake, two- to four-bedroom suites, tailored for the leisure golf traveler, so you can bring small groups of from four to eight."

If you're thinking buddy trip, playing either Whistling Straits or Blackwolf Run – four courses that pack a punch – so is Willis.

"The buddy trip is huge. It's the fastest-growing segment of our business in golf," Willis said. "We've always

been strong with buddy trips, groups of from four to 20 players, but even the last couple years, we've experienced 10 percent growth in that market along, and with the Ryder Cup coming up, that's not going to slow down. They can utilize the common area in the middle of them or an outdoor area, the perfect buddy trip sort of thing, and there's a putting green right there at the hotel. That and the full-service bar have been a great complement to the golf courses we already have."

The PGA of America is coordinating all ticket and hospitality sales during the Ryder Cup, but Kohler will handle the rest. And that's plenty, including play on Whistling Straits and the Irish Course before and after, play at Blackwolf Run, and lodging at their glittering hotels, buddy trips and otherwise. The Straits will be closed to play for a time before and after the Ryder Cup for the construction and removal of the massive infrastructure that goes with big-time golf these days, so expect tee times both there and at Blackwolf Run to be at a premium.

If you do get on, bring your A game. Pete Dye didn't design courses for beginners.

"They can be as hard as you want them to be, let's just put it that way," Willis said. "People are surprised about how playable they can be. It's all about picking the right tee."

Or asking for help. And help is available.

"One of the great advantages we have over any of our competitors is our caddie program," Willis said. "We've got over 200 full-time professional caddies. They're there to help navigate you around the golf course, whether you're walking or riding a cart and grab a forecaddie. They become more popular every year, even at Blackwolf Run, where the majority of people still take carts. Not only does it help their game a little bit, but it's a different experience."

Beyond the Kohler properties, Wisconsin long passed Illinois as a golf resort hotbed. Along with the Links of Lawsonia, the longtime favorite of William

Langford course architecture aficionados in Green Lake, there's Erin Hills in Erin, Geneva National and Grand Geneva – which began life as the Playboy Club Resort – in Lake Geneva, and Sand Valley in Nekoosa, well west of Sheboygan.

Those destination courses will allow the golfer who has tickets to the Ryder Cup to put together his or her own dream trip of play and spectating.

Those who attended one of the PGA Championships at Whistling Straits will recall the mini-Alps gallery members had to climb and carefully tiptoe down – or take a tumble – while getting outstanding views of the action. At the first PGA there in 2004, the PGA of America issued a daily spectator injury report.

"There are subtle little things we changed on the golf course, the interior parts of the dunes and the walking paths in the dunes have been expanded, and the undulations have been changed to bring more amphitheater-type seating without the need for more grandstands," Willis said. "And to make it easier to traverse from hole to hole."

Dustin Johnson, a likely member of the American squad, may not be pleased to know the bunker he didn't know was a bunker during the final round of the 2010 PGA – a penalty costing him a place in the playoff won by Martin Kaymer over Bubba Watson – is still to the far right of the 18th fairway. He likely will be pleased to know there will be a hospitality structure on top of that, as was the case for the 2015 PGA.

In fact, Whistling Straits will look like a small city in Switzerland, so many multi-story structures will be atop the Dye-made hills. Corporate customers will get sweeping views.

"We launched corporate hospitality last year and we had very strong response to the push from some of our key partner relationships," Willis said. "That caused us to go back to our plans to see where we can expand those opportunities. One of the hot spots for us has been that mid-market 30-person product that sold out pretty quickly. So we basically doubled it. We

had it players right on No. 1, and we've doubled it with a two-story structure on the left side of No. 1. The views from that are going to be phenomenal. You get a panoramic view of the lake, No. 8, No. 2, No. 9 and No. 1 from one location."

Regular ticket holders can climb to similar hills to view several holes elsewhere on the course. Given the few matches at

the Ryder Cup – four at a time on Friday and Saturday morning and afternoon, and a dozen during Sunday's singles showdown – the best plan may be to follow Patton's dictum, taking the high ground.

The ticket lottery is closed, and lottery winners are expected to be notified by October if they're in or out. But with any big event, there's an aftermarket for tickets.

If the clamor for tickets to the Ryder Cup at Medinah is any indication, this will be Wisconsin golf spectating's version of a Bears-Packers game at Lambeau Field, only more so. The expectation is that some 200,000 fans will come through the gates for the week, including for the practice rounds. If you want to be among them, be prepared to dig deep.



Straits Course at Whistling Straits, Hole 7, Shipwreck
Photo courtesy of Kohler Co.