



The 43rd Ryder Cup Matches

Fans Set To Roar at Whistling Straits

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Golf gallery roars come in many different sizes and flavors. There's the "birdie roar" which occurs on a tournament's final day when one of the leaders rams home a critical putt to inch a stroke closer to victory. Then there's the "eagle roar" for the rare occasion when a player converts a seemingly miraculous bunker shot or greenside chip on a par 5 to leap over a slew of competitors on the leaderboard.

But there's still another golf roar. It is heard every two years in either Europe or the United States when the Ryder Cup Matches pit the best professional Americans against their counterparts across the pond. Back in 2012, the matches took place in Chicago's western suburbs at Medinah Country Club. For two glorious days, the American team led by Tiger Woods and then-US Open champion Webb Simpson poured in birdie after improbable birdie to take a commanding lead going into the final day's singles matches. Throughout that Friday and Saturday, fans didn't need a scoreboard to know how the American teams were performing. All anyone had to do was stand somewhere on the course or even outside the club gates to hear the deafening cheers and chants of "USA! USA! USA!" after the national team sunk another

crucial putt. In fairness, the noise was defused a bit during the final day when Team Europe stunned the Americans with a miraculous comeback to earn the cherished cup. Forever in history known as "The Miracle at Medinah" or "The Meltdown at Medinah" depending on what side you were pulling for.

As a golf writer who has covered tournaments at all levels for over 30 years, I was inspired by the glee the galleries exuded when a player won a hole or earned a point. Think of the thunderous cheers heard during the World Cup finals. Or of the booming howls heard after a 4th quarter touchdown in the Super Bowl. Then add a decibel or two. That's the Ryder Cup roar.

On September 24 – 26, galleries will take to the fairway edges and greensides of Whistling Straits in Haven, Wisc., to support Team USA as it takes on Team Europe in the 43rd Ryder Cup Matches. Originally scheduled for 2020, the event was postponed last year due to the pandemic. While golf tournaments were played throughout much of the 2020 season, both teams—along with the PGA of America which manages the event—felt strongly that Ryder Cup Matches without spectators (and, thus, sans the "Ryder Cup roar") were not the spectacle which has made them the greatest golf show on earth since 1927 when they originated. Indeed, these matches truly only reached their passion peak in 1979 when the competition was adjusted from US v. Great Britain and Ireland to US v. all of Europe. That inclusion of the finest professional golfers from the likes of Spain, Germany and Italy significantly increased the competitive landscape between the two teams. Every two years, the event switches between a European site and a US location. The 2018 matches were won by Team Europe in a rout, 17-1/2 to 10-1/2 points. In 2016, Team USA leveraged its home-field advantage at Hazeltine National to win 17 to 11.

Much care has seemingly been taken by Team USA to avenge its 2018 loss. For starters, the team captain is Steve Stricker, a Ryder Cup veteran and a Wisconsin native who will presumably offer his team insights on the fickle winds off Lake Michigan which borders the golf course. Supporting Stricker will be five vice-captains—five-time Ryder Cup player Zach Johnson, 2016 Ryder Cup



captain Davis Love III, 2018 Ryder Cup captain Jim Furyk, 12-time Ryder Cup player Phil Mickelson, and five-time Ryder Cup player Fred Couples. Through mid-August, at least, there remained the possibility of Tiger Woods being named as a vice-captain to join the team for both strategic and morale purposes. Woods continues to work on his recovery from a car accident which has made him unavailable.

The “X-factor” in all of these preparations is Whistling Straits. Considered one of the top 25 golf courses in America by *Golf Digest*, the course was designed by Pete Dye. The course is already tournament-proven as it hosted the PGA Championship in 2004, 2010, and 2015. Sculpted along 2.5 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline, Whistling Straits is a hybrid between the great links courses of Ireland and Scotland, combined with a little bit of Pebble Beach and a whole lot of Pete Dye. The late designer considered Whistling Straits one of his greatest accomplishments. Provided 560 acres of shoreline and a vast budget, Dye was directed by plumbing magnate Herb Kohler to transform the former aircraft weapons firing range into a legendary layout. “I want the course to look like it’s in Ireland,” he said. Dye used all of his 40+ years’ experience combined with 13,000 truckloads of sand imported from area farmers and a Panzer division of earth movers to design a course like no other in Wisconsin. Or in the Midwest. Or in America, for that matter.

“I get excited the moment I step on this property,” said Mike O’Reilly, director of operations at Whistling Straits in a June interview. “It’s a fantastic course for match-play as every hole challenges the player to strategize where to place the tee shot and where to aim on the green. There’s lots of risks and lots of rewards.”

Gary D’Amato has observed the evolution of Whistling Straits from

its inception to its construction to its present status as one of the country’s finest public golf courses. “It’s hard to believe that this spectacular landscape of soaring dunes, fescue-covered mounds and jagged-edged bunkers once was flat as a pancake,” said the writer for *Wisconsin Golf* magazine. “Only Pete Dye could imagine such a place, and then bring it to life. Whistling Straits is Ballybunion without the salt spray.”

O’Reilly makes an interesting comparison as Whistling Straits plays so similar to European links courses that it would seemingly give an edge to the Europeans who spend much of their season playing courses that are firm and fast. “The best team normally is the one who wins,” said O’Reilly. “The American team will consist of players who have enjoyed successes in the Open Championship.” To his point, Collin Morikawa won this year’s Open Championship, with Americans Jordan Spieth, Dustin Johnson, Brooks Koepka, and Daniel Berger all finishing in the top 10. Morikawa, Johnson, and Koepka had already qualified for this year’s team as of mid-August, along with Bryson DeChambeau, Justin Thomas, and Olympic gold medalist Xander Schauffele. The other six members will be captain’s picks and are expected to include Tony Finau, Daniel Berger, Spieth, Harris English, and Patrick Reed. Those final six selections were to be announced following the Tour Championship at East Lake during the first week of September.

Team Europe will be led by PGA Tour superstar Jon Rahm along with Tommy Fleetwood, Tyrrell Hatton, and Matthew Fitzpatrick. Likely qualifiers as of mid-August were Rory McIlroy, Viktor Hovland, Paul Casey, and Lee Westwood. Team captain Padraig Harrington will choose the final three selections.

Event organizers are preparing for a gallery of nearly 40,000 per day at the event. While officials are cautiously optimistic that the outdoor venue will provide a fun and safe environment for

the matches, specific health and safety guidelines will be updated as the event draws near.

All Midwesterners know that late September weather may play a significant role in how the course challenges the Ryder Cup players. Temperatures have been known to drop by as much as 20 degrees during autumn afternoons. Winds coming off the lake could play a big factor in how aggressively the contestants attack the flags.

Gallery members will not have to search far to locate key holes which could determine the winners and losers. The greens of both No. 9 and 18 are right behind the clubhouse. Each requires difficult approach shots to greens protected by water and sand. Without many trees across the course, designer Dye placed “about 1,000 bunkers” everywhere across the property. In fact, no one knows the exact number of bunkers on the course as they are deviously located near greens, near landing areas, and far away from greens and far away from landing areas.

“While the sloping greens and Lake Michigan winds play a factor on the course,” said WGN sportscaster Dan Roan who played Whistling Straits in June, “the number, size and variety of bunkers is what makes it challenging.” Roan pointed to No. 17 as a key hole for the Ryder Cup contestants “if they make it that far.” Nicknamed “Pinch Nerve” due to a wide array of obstacles from tee to green. The 249-yard par 3 offers no safe areas around the raised putting surface. Lake Michigan lurks along the left side of the green while a formidable raised pot bunker resides to the right. Wild grasses and more bunkers blanket the rest of the green. “Simply put, the player has to land on this large green or suffer the consequences,” said Roan.

Whistling Straits is one of four championship courses

that make up Kohler Golf. The award-winning Irish Course resides on the same property as Whistling Straits and was also designed by Dye.

Twenty minutes away from those courses, Blackwolf Run serves up two remarkable championship courses while completely different in look and feel to the fairways and greens of their counterparts. The stunning River course features water or valleys on 14 of its 18 holes. The Meadow Valleys course serves up rolling terrain and natural gorges. Both of these courses, along with the Straits courses, are perennially ranked among the top 10 golf courses in Wisconsin.

Introduced to the public in June, The Baths of Blackwolf Run is a 10-hole par 3 course that pays homage to Kohler Company’s 128-year history of bath-design products. The delightful and tricky course can be played with just a few clubs and is complemented by a two-acre putting course. Speaking in front of a crowd of youth groups and local golf organizations at the new course’s grand opening, Herbert V. Kohler Jr., executive chairman of Kohler Company and co-designer of the course, said that The Baths was designed as a multi-purpose facility. “Our intent for The Baths is that it will quickly become a place where people from all walks of life will be introduced to the great game of golf,” he said. It is expected that The Baths will be used by golf guests before or after playing one of the Kohler Golf’s championship courses but will also be accessible to juniors and seniors learning the game.

The golf courses are part of Destination Kohler, which incorporates the five-star American Club Hotel, the Inn on Woodlake, the Kohler Cabin Collection and the Kohler Waters Spa, along with dozens of other amenities including fine dining and the Kohler Golf Academy.

PROFILES

Todd Mrowice



The Fitting Van Experience

The pandemic golf “boom” has impacted every aspect of the industry. Now, more than ever, consumers are investing money in their games. From where you play to what you’re wearing on the course, chances are you’ve spent some extra coin on your golf habit over the past year plus. And if you’re one of the many that invested in new equipment, here’s hoping that you had them custom fit to your specs.

PGA TOUR Superstore does a fantastic job of custom fitting clubs at no charge. It’s part of the fabric when visiting the experiential golf retailer. If you’re the type of person that wants a “next level” experience though, the Fitting Van Experience is your place to be. This private, one-on-one session with a certified Fitting Van Specialist is a deep dive into how you swing your sticks and what the best route is for you to get to lower scores. How do they get you there? A combination of game-changing technology, manufacturer-specific equipment, and the personal attention from your specialist. This can include a new club purchase or an evaluation of what you currently game.

Danny Kusek, a Fitting Van Specialist at the PGA TOUR Superstore location in Downers Grove (1017 Butterfield Rd.), believes players of all skill levels benefit from this club-fitting experience, because he’s seen it firsthand.

“The average player will see a huge benefit to having their clubs custom fit for them,” said Kusek. “They have the

fitter’s undivided attention, they make an appointment so there is no waiting in the store, and they are encouraged to give the fitter what their detailed needs and wants are from their current equipment or new equipment. More accomplished players can plan on seeing smaller misses and equipment that compliments their game.”

The current options available to book for the Fitting Van Experience include an iron fitting, driver fitting, fairway/hybrid fitting, putter fitting, wedge fit/gaping, and a 10-club gap analysis. Each individual service varies from 60 to 90 minutes and pricing ranges from \$39.99 to \$49.99. Reservations can be made by calling your local store or booking online at pgatoursuperstore.com.

While you may be considering the Fitting Van Experience for yourself, another person to consider is a youth golfer close to you. Especially those in high school that are reaching new strides with their golf games. Parents, before investing in those new clubs,

this service will ensure your dollars are well spent.

“Having equipment properly sized is a monumental benefit,” said Kusek. “I equate it to driving a car after you’ve adjusted seats, mirrors, radio, and climate controls. Proper fitting makes everything much more comfortable.”

In addition to the Downers Grove location, you can also find the Fitting Van Experience at PGA TOUR Superstore locations in Schaumburg (1319 E. Golf Rd.) and Vernon Hills (295 Center Dr. next to Hawthorn Mall).

