

Golf Insider

PGA Tour shortens season, adds playoff

Players excited about '07 playoff

By STAN AWTREY
Cox News Service



RICH ADDICKS / Cox News Service

When the PGA Tour debuts its FedEx Cup series in seven weeks, it will be the most eventful change in professional golf since the implementation of the all-exempt tour in 1983. It's so important that the PGA Tour has a second-by-second countdown on its Web site.

The new plan will compress the regular season into 33 weeks, implement a much-discussed four-week playoff system and pay the winner of the FedEx Cup championship an unheard-of sum of \$10 million.

But will it work? "Our hope and our belief is that the fans will connect to this competition," PGA Tour commissioner Tim Finchem said during last weekend's Tour Championship.

The players, with few exceptions, are standing behind Finchem, who borrowed the post-season playoff concept from an individual sport like NASCAR rather than a team sports league like the NFL. They'll play the regular season for playoff seeding, then use the playoffs to earn a spot in the Tour Championship.

"We're going to learn as we go, but the potential is phenomenal," Ryder Cup member Zach Johnson said. "The Tour's done a great job making great decisions and using our input on it, too. It means a lot of positive things."

The 2007 schedule, which begins with the Mercedes Championship in January, offers a definitive end to the tour's season. Since the finale will come in September rather than in the middle of football season, the

game's best players — Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson — should still be in golf mode.

"I think with these drawn-out seasons, you lose people sometimes, and that's why I think shortening the season, even if it's just by one month, is going to help a lot of things," AT&T Pebble Beach winner Arron Oberholser said. "You're going to get more of the top players playing more often, in my opinion."

But it remains to be seen whether Woods and Mickelson, the two guys who move the ratings needle, will play all three weeks of the playoff series that leads to the Tour Championship. Doing so will mean an intense four-week stretch, something most top level players aren't used to attempting.

Once the pros factor in the WGC Bridgestone and the PGA Championship in early August, they could end up playing six or seven consecutive events.

Finchem admitted this week he has no guarantees about player participation.

"I think everyone in world golf will be surprised if Tiger and Phil play six or seven [straight weeks]," U.S. Open champion Geoff Ogilvy said. "Vijay [Singh] will play six or seven. Most guys will. You've got to make the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow big enough that people want to do it, and the pot is a pretty big pot."

A \$10 million pot is substantial, but is it enough to ensure the presence of Woods, who will be paid \$4 million in appearance money to play this week in China?

The other question is whether the playoff fields should be trimmed through the process, rather than produce a 144-player field for each of the three weeks. Veteran Tom Pernice Jr. said it's not a playoff unless players are eliminated, and that there's still time to make the changes.

"They need that cut from a week-to-week basis," Pernice said. "If we're going to do things and do it right, then we need to worry about the best players, and the best players would like the fields cut. That's just me talking to some of the top players. I don't think our staff and [Finchem] need to worry about playing opportunities for guys who are 140th on the points system."

The PGA Tour said that changes won't come in 2007 but acknowledged alterations likely will be made before 2008.

"I'm not going to say it's without imperfections," said Stewart Cink, a three-time competitor in the Ryder Cup. "All that stuff will come out next year as we go. It'll need to be tweaked a little bit to improve, and I'm sure that's going to happen; it's a 100 percent likelihood that's going to happen. The way it's designed now, it'll be exciting; players will talk about it, players will care about it."

IT'S GOOD FOR YOUR GAME

A new kind of grip

On a monthly basis, I field questions about the claw putting grip, which, while unique in the amateur ranks, is no longer such an oddity on the PGA and Nationwide tours.

Originally developed by touring pro Skip Kendall, the "claw" has saved quite a few careers in a game where 30 or more putts are a one-way ticket to the broadcaster's booth. Some of the redeemed are Tom Kite, Kevin Sutherland, Mark O'Meara, Mark Calcavecchia and, of course, Chris DiMarco, who used it in his epic battle with Tiger Woods in the '05 Masters.

There are several variations, but the following is the "normal" version of this unusual grip:

1. First, hold the handle of your putter with your target hand only, using a standard grip.
2. Then let your trail arm hang naturally by your side with the fingers pointing toward the ground. Stretch your thumb down so that the webbed area between the thumb and the forefinger is taut and each finger extended.
3. Next slide the trail hand toward the putter until the webbing gently touches the handle of the putter just below your top hand grip. Retain some bend in your trail elbow with the fingers in your trail hand extended.

The "claw" keeps your trail hand and arm out of the stroke, and for older players like Calcavecchia and Kite, it can cure the "twitches."

The other great advantage of the claw is that since the force that moves the putter head is the shoulders, the putter head is allowed to swing very level to the ground both back and through. This promotes a solid strike in the middle of the putter face with a much more consistent roll.



South African Charl Schwartzel uses the claw, a putting grip that's designed to keep the right hand from overwhelming the left and shutting the face, a common cause of missed putts. He's placed two tees to form a gate that his putter must pass through, and now all he has to do is grove his stroke by hitting putt after putt.



With a square face and proper path assured, the hole will fill up in a hurry, so Schwartzel's caddie is strategically located to help with the "drainage" problem.

Azinger: Change is good for Ryder Cup

By CRAIG DOLCH
Cox News Service

West Palm Beach, Fla.

Even before Paul Azinger formally was announced as the 2008 U.S. Ryder Cup captain Monday, he made some decisions that could have a lasting effect on the competition.

At Azinger's urging, the PGA of America essentially is blowing up its points system to determine the Ryder Cup team, replacing its top-10-finishes system with cash as the only way to earn a spot on the team.

Moreover, the number of captain's picks has been doubled from two to four, and the length of time to earn points has been cut in half — with the exception of the majors — as the Americans try to end a three-match losing streak, their longest in the 79-year history of the competition.

"I think this is the best way," Azinger said after he was announced as the captain during a news conference at Valhalla Golf Club in Louisville, Ky., the site of the 2008 matches.

"Money has always been the barometer. I played the PGA Tour this year on an exemption given to me because I'm in the top 50 all-time money winners. I had to finish in the top 125 on the money list so I could play next year. If I play the Senior Tour, I'm going to

be eligible because of where I am on the all-time money list. We are always rewarded based on our earnings, and I just think it is the best way."

The PGA decided to get away from its system to award points solely for top-10 finishes when it became apparent that because of the influx of foreign players on the PGA Tour, the Americans weren't finishing in the top 10 often enough to make it relevant. Only 63 percent of the available points were awarded for the most recent Ryder Cup at The K Club, and most of those went to Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson and Jim Furyk.

The PGA now will rely essentially on the PGA Tour's money list — one point will be awarded for every \$1,000 earned at the four majors in 2007 and Tour events in 2008, with double points for the 2008 majors. Opposite-field events that always attract weaker fields will be worth only a half point for every \$1,000 in 2008.

Players who earned top-10 finishes from the PGA Championship through last week's Tour Championship still will receive those points because the PGA didn't feel it should change the rules in the middle of the process. But those points only will count one-fourth of the overall value.

"We felt it was very important to award those points because those players had been playing assuming they were getting those points," said Roger Warren, the PGA's outgoing president. "The increase to four captain's picks

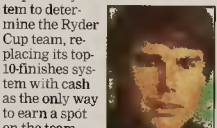
reflects the changing face of tournament golf in America with more international players playing here and more Americans playing around the world."

The PGA knows it has to do something after watching the U.S. lose the past two Ryder Cups by the most lopsided scores ever. With the American losing all five sessions at The K Club, European captain Ian Woosnam said the U.S. had to make changes to its system to keep the matches interesting.

"I have to admit there were times at The K Club when I felt a little sorry for my U.S. counterpart, Tom Lehman, when I saw all that European blue on the scoreboard," Woosnam told European writers last week. "Tom did everything he possibly could, but the way his team was chosen for him didn't make it a level playing field. In America, only the top 10 [in every event] get Ryder Cup points and you get more points winning a small event than being top five in a major. Now that's ridiculous."

Although Azinger said he pushed hard for all of these changes, he pointed out those alone won't change the U.S. fortunes in the Ryder Cup. After all, there's not many systems that would have made the Americans winners in the recent Ryder Cup.

"I believe in the very end, the responsibility is going to have to fall on the players," said Azinger, a four-time Ryder Cupper and the 1993 PGA champion. "Just so you know, I'm going to be their captain, not their coach."



AZINGER

THE GOLF DOCTOR

Reading greens: Research shows that most golfers don't read enough break into their putts, and this affects the putter's speed and direction. This is due to the inability of the golfer to gauge the effect of the slope.

The best way to evaluate the severity of a slope is to position yourself behind the hole. If it's uphill, study the line from behind your ball looking back up the hill. If it's a downhill putt, walk to the other side of the hole and look up the hill to your ball.

And to read the green's more subtle side-hill contours, take a walk around the hole and pick out the low side of your putt. Position yourself about halfway between your ball and the hole so you can look "up" the slope for the proper perspective.

The best way to stop pulling and pushing your putts is to forget about the hole and focus on the break point. To determine the

break, pick a spot on the curve or arc of the putt where the putt will start the major portion of its break to the hole.

Once this spot is selected, it takes the place of the hole as your target. Then, having lined up your putter face with that spot, forget about direction (it's taken care of at address) and focus on producing the correct speed that will send the ball rolling along the arc and breaking to the hole at just the right point.

Once you determine the break point, approach the ball, set your putter face behind it in the direction you want the ball to start and align your body perpendicular to the putter face.

To practice break-point putting, mark your break point with an object like a coin and practice rolling your ball over it.

— T.J. Tomasi



Dr. T.J. Tomasi is a teaching professional at Nantuxet Golf Club on Nantuxet Island, Mass. To ask him a question about golf, e-mail him at: Tjinsider@aol.com.

ASK THE PRO

Q: I am a 66-year-old with 80 mph clubhead speed. I use a 460cc 10-degree driver. I hit about 200 to 220 yards and am in the fairway 90 percent of the time. I would like to know what to do to increase my clubhead speed. — Jack E. Spring Hill, Fla.

A: Generating power involves a number of elements, one of which is the ability to move the clubhead quickly and another is the solidity of contact. The good news is there's a drill that will teach you to swing the club quickly so that it impact the club is back in front of your body, a position that squares the clubface to the ball, ensuring solid contact.

Here's the drill: Turn your driver upside down and hold it by its neck using your normal grip. Take your golf stance, then stand straight up so you are vertical to the ground. Extend your arms chest high and

slowly swing the club by rotating your chest. Let your forearms rotate via the momentum of the swing.

Gradually increase the speed of rotation until you are making full-speed swings that produce a whooshing sound at the bottom of the swing arc, in the impact area; the higher the pitch, the faster the speed.

If you allow it to happen, you'll hear the whoosh just where it should be — in the middle of your body as your arms return to their midchest address position without any manipulation.

This way the whoosh is not only the sound of speed, it's also the sound of solid contact.

If your arm muscles are weak and your grip too tight, you'll have a low-grade whoosh. As your strength grows, your whoosh will rise to a high-grade whoosh.

SCHEDULE

All Times EST
PGA EUROPEAN TOUR
HSCB Champions
• Site: Shanghai, China.
• Schedule: Thursday-Sunday
• Course: Shanghai Sheshan International Golf Club (7,165 yards, par 72).
• Purse: \$5 million. Winner's share: \$653,300.
• TV: The Golf Channel (Wednesday, 11 p.m.-3 a.m.; Thursday-Saturday, 9 a.m.-noon, 11 p.m.-3 a.m.; Sunday, 9 a.m.-noon).

PGA TOUR
LPGA TOUR
Champions
• Site: Mobile, Ala.
• Schedule: Thursday-Sunday
• Course: Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, Magnolia Grove complex, Crossings Course (6,283 yards, par 72).
• Purse: \$1 million. Winner's share: \$150,000.
• TV: The Golf Channel (Thursday, 5-7:30 p.m.; Friday-Saturday, 4:30-6 a.m., 5-7:30 p.m.; Sunday, 4:30-6 a.m., 6:30-8 p.m.; Monday, 3-4 a.m.).

PGA TOUR CHALLENGE SEASON
Merrill Lynch Shootout
• Site: Naples, Fla.
• Schedule: Friday-Sunday
• Course: Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, Tiburon Golf Club (7,288 yards, par 72).
• Purse: \$2.75 million. Winner's share: \$337,500 each.
• TV: USA (Friday, 4-6 p.m.) and CBS (Saturday, 1-3:30 p.m.; Sunday, 4-6 p.m.).

NATIONWIDE TOUR
Nationwide Tour Championship
• Site: Richmond, Texas.
• Schedule: Thursday-Sunday
• Course: The Houstonian Golf and Country Club (7,100 yards, par 72).
• Purse: \$750,000. Winner's share: \$135,000.
• TV: The Golf Channel (Thursday, 2:30-5 p.m., 9-10:30 p.m.; Friday-Saturday, 2:30-5 p.m., 9-11 p.m.; Sunday, 2:30-5 p.m., 10 p.m.-midnight).

LEADERS

WORLD RANKINGS	
1. Tiger Woods	21.59
2. Jim Furyk	9.15
3. Phil Mickelson	8.36
4. Adam Scott	7.73
5. Vijay Singh	6.43
6. Retief Goosen	6.40
7. Luke Donald	5.99
8. Ernie Els	5.90
9. Sergio Garcia	5.76
10. Geoff Ogilvy	5.54
11. P. Harrington	5.11
12. H. Stenson	4.70
13. T. Immelman	4.65
14. David Howell	4.59
15. Paul Casey	4.27

MONEY LEADERS

PGA TOUR	
Player	Money
1. Tiger Woods	\$9,941,563
2. Jim Furyk	\$7,213,316
3. Adam Scott	\$4,976,858
4. Vijay Singh	\$4,602,416
5. Geoff Ogilvy	\$4,354,969
6. Phil Mickelson	\$4,256,505
7. T. Immelman	\$3,844,189
8. Stuart Appleby	\$3,470,457
9. Luke Donald	\$3,177,408
10. B. Wetherich	\$3,023,185

LPGA TOUR

Player	Money
1. Lorena Ochoa	\$2,342,872
2. A. Sorenstam	\$1,906,126
3. Karrie Webb	\$1,889,613
4. Cristie Kerr	\$1,539,501
5. Mi Hyun Kim	\$1,308,616

CHAMPIONS TOUR

Player	Money
1. Jay Haas	\$2,420,227
2. Loren Roberts	\$2,365,395
3. Brad Bryant	\$1,692,417
4. Tom Kite	\$1,643,348
5. Gil Morgan	\$1,525,050