



GARY GALYEAN'S GOLF LETTER[®]

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Dear Subscriber:

The 117th U.S. Open Erin Hills

When last we looked in on the U.S. Open - at the Oakmont prize giving last June - the United States Golf Association was being booed for the calamitous way in which they handled the ruling/overruling when Dustin Johnson's ball moved on the 5th green of the final round as he was preparing to putt.

The potency of their admitted mistake was magnified in many minds because it was the third consecutive year that the association appeared to mishandle the national championship. At Pinehurst (2014) the introduction of waste areas created unpredictably random lies that were loathed by the players. At Chambers Bay (2015) the fescue greens and generally odd design of the new course were disdained by the players. And then there was the Oakmont ruling debacle.

To counter the mistakes that were taking on an aoristically indeterminate trend, the U.S.G.A. worked during the past year to increase their popularity with their declining television audience (see below) by ingratiating themselves with the tour players who were becoming increasingly outspoken in their criticism. Elements of this new effort included: a \$2 million addition to the U.S. Open prize money making it the biggest purse in the game at \$12 million; and, according to THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, the meeting of the U.S.G.A. Executive Director and C.E.O., Mike Davis, with individual players as well as "a mini-road show, appearing twice in recent months at meetings of PGA players to explain how [the U.S.G.A. spends] the revenue the [U.S.] Open generates".

Additionally and most specifically, the conclusion must be drawn that further appeasement of the players was sought at Erin Hills with the introduction of wider fairways, a less penal first cut of rough, and slower putting speeds, the advantage of which was magnified by Erin Hills' generally flatter and less undulating greens. A course that produced lots of booming drives and birdies made for happy professionals but continued the decline in attention of the viewing public.

If it was the U.S.G.A.'s 2017 mission to avoid any calamity that would cast blame on the association for the fourth consecutive year, their approach ironically accomplished just the opposite. This miscue resulted in a national championship that was contrived to avoid the elements that have always defined it, and thus created a greater train wreck than any championship since 2004. Erin Hills was not the mental test the U.S. Open always is because a.) accurate driving was not demanded, thus making it a second-shot golf course, and b.) the large greens provided large targets and the light contouring did not provide the putting test that is characteristic of the U.S. Open. As the performance statistics show the 117th U.S. Open produced more birdies than any previous championship, tied the sub-par record for the first round, tied and then exceeded the sub-par record for a single round, and tied the four-round sub-par total. And, as the television statistics show, viewers went elsewhere.

Thursday Burning Blimp

The day began with temperatures in the 80s and almost no wind on a course previously softened by rain. Rickie Fowler, with the better fortune of being assigned

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The 117th U.S. Open

a morning starting time under these conditions, took full advantage producing a round of 7-under-par that equaled the U.S. Open's lowest, first-round score to par. Jack Nicklaus and Tom Weiskopf were also 7-under after their opening rounds at Baltusrol in 1980.

The equaling of the first round record by Mr. Fowler's seven birdies and eleven pars signalled the unusually benign and banal set-up of Erin Hills as a national championship examination. As the wind picked up in the afternoon so did the hope of those looking for an exacting test. Alas, it did not appear. Erin Hills' wide fairways and large, flatish putting greens were not factors. Bad execution by the players - really bad execution for those who play at this level - was the championship's only defense on Thursday.

On Thursday, three essential elements of the U.S. Open examination were revealed to be missing:

- a.) narrow fairways,
- b.) penal rough just off the fairways, and
- c.) green contours that require players to weigh the advantage of playing to the flag rather than having to negotiate the green contours of a long putt.

The burning remains of a crashed blimp in a field half a mile from the course on Thursday struck some of those who saw it as a Melville-like metaphor for the coming championship. Extending the symbolism, the Washington County Sheriff's Office issued a press release stating that the blimp "may have experienced problems prior to the crash".

Friday "It's bombs away."

Second round conditions were not a lot different from the day before. Thursday's afternoon breeze resulted in Friday's greens being slightly firmer, but there was still little wind and the temperature was again in the 80s.

Mike Davis, U.S.G.A. executive director and C.E.O., said the greens were faster and the course generally firmer. "Exactly what we want," he commented.

Sergio Garcia, who recorded scores of 70 and 71, observed that the course offered "a little more room that we are used to at a U.S. Open".

Paul Casey's recovery was impressive in the second round. After going 4-over on two holes (the 14th and 15th; his fifth and sixth of the day, as he started at the 10th), Mr. Casey, who has the most top ten finishes in major championships without a win, followed with five straight birdies on holes 17, 18, 1, 2, 3. "It's the attitude," he said later. "It's about the grit. I showed a bit of that today."

More impactful was Hideki Matsuyama's 65, which was the result of six birdies on the front (30), one birdie on the back (35), and no bogeys front or back.

More than 40 players finished the 36-hole midpoint under par. Mr. Casey, Brooks Koepka, Brian Harman and Tommy Fleetwood were tied for the lead at 7-under. Mr. Fowler recovered nicely from three successive bogeys to finish 1-over for the day and 6-under for the championship.

Most astonishing - and most agonizing for Fox Sports - was the inexplicable elimination of six of the world's ten best players: Dustin Johnson (1), Rory McIlroy (2), Jason Day (3), Henrik Stenson (6), Alex Noren (8) and Jon Rahm (10). Such a phenomenon under such unexacting conditions lead to a lot of head scratching.

Saturday Bombers and Birdies

For those in their third day of trying to make sense of the Erin Hills' set-up, i.e. those wondering if there was some greater, hidden strategy in the U.S.G.A.'s unusual approach, the answer was a stupefying "there is not". As the day unfolded after .9 inches of overnight rain and more light breeze, the unthreatening fairway widths and the unthreatening green contours produced 11 players posting 4-under or better.

As the last game took to the course, 14 were within one shot of the lead [8 U.S. players, 2 Englishmen, 1 each from South Africa, Australia, Japan and South Korea]. Fourteen minutes later, seven were tied at 7-under [5 U.S. and 2 English]. Twenty-one minutes after that, six were tied at 8-under. And so the scoring festival unfolded narrated by never-ending maundering from the Fox Sports commentators that, by their own admission, is only suspended when it is possible to eavesdrop on a player talking to his caddie.

By the end of the day, Mr. Harman played himself into the lead at 12-under by exhibiting remarkable consistency. He carded six birdies and one bogey - only his second bogey in three rounds.

However, it was the Kentuckian, Justin Thomas, who became the day's leading story by posting a 9-under 63 - a new record for the lowest U.S. Open under-par round. Johnny Miller's 63 at Oakmont in 1973 was *only* 8-under par. Mr. Thomas' scorecard included 1 eagle, 9 birdies, and 2 bogeys.

"Be as good as you look," Mr. Thomas called to his ball after striking it with a 3-wood and watching it finish just a few feet from the hole at the par-4, 288-yard 15th. He missed the eagle putt.

After successfully holing a long birdie putt on the 17th, Mr. Thomas played two 3-woods to eight feet at the par-5, 667-yard 18th!

Mr. Thomas' 3-wood play, as well as Mr. Stenson's last year at Royal Troon, lends weight to the point that 3-woods have not been as tightly regulated technically as have drivers. Have those pesky equipment makers found a loophole?

If greater popularity were the goal at Erin Hills, then success in that regard was evident among those playing for the money but not so much among those paying the television licensing fees. The overnight ratings for the third round tied with NBC in 2014 as the second lowest rated Saturday ever for the U.S. Open. While there was a slight improvement over 2016 [Oakmont] that is not saying much as 2016 was the lowest rating ever for third round coverage. In another comparison of the third round, Erin Hills fell 41 per cent behind Merion in 2013.

Theories as to the reason for the drop include the absence of the three top ranked players in the world; the first time since 1994 that both Phil Mickelson and Tiger Woods did not play on the weekend; the absence of Mr. Woods regardless of Mr. Mickelson's whereabouts; and the lack of any significant rivalries.

Sunday An Asterisked U.S. Open

Early Sunday morning the wind was blowing to 25 mph. By the time the leaders started, it had slowed to 15 mph with gusts to 20 mph. With this in mind, Mr. Davis made two decisions: a.) to slow the greens, which at this point could probably only be done by not rolling them, and b.) to move the more precarious hole locations to safer, flatter areas. Both actions would help to eliminate a catastrophe like the one that took place in 2004 at Shinnecock Hills when some of the greens had to be watered during the round in order to keep balls from being blown from putting greens into bunkers or rough.

Some Las Vegas odds before play on Sunday:

Fowler/Casey	11/2
Koepka	13/2
Matsuyama	9/1
Fleetwood/Holmes	12/1
Harman	15/1
Lovemark	20/1
Garcia	25/1
Thomas	40/1

By the time Mr. Koepka finished his 72 holes - tying Mr. McIlroy's record (Congressional, 2011) for the lowest U.S. Open total score in relation to par (16 under) - the argument that Erin Hills did not present the test elements that have always been the U.S.G.A.'s hallmark could not be repudiated. In addition to the new records already mentioned, Erin Hills yielded 1,363 birdies - 122 more than the previous record.

However, Mr. Koepka's consistency was to be applauded. His performance statistics included just one three putt in 72 holes; he hit 62 of 72 greens in regulation, ranking 1st in the field; tied for 4th place in fairways hit, 49 of 56; was 7th in driving distance averaging 322.1 yards; 2nd in birdies with 21; and 51st in putting with 123 total/1.17 average.

Fox Sport's 2017 Sunday performance was not as impressive as the champion's. Overnight ratings showed that it was the second lowest audience for the U.S. Open finishing 6 per cent higher than Pinehurst 2014, which was the lowest. Sunday viewing was 8 per cent lower than Oakmont 2016 and 27 per cent lower than Chambers Bay 2015.

Conclusion

- The suggestion that as long as it wasn't a disaster it must have been a success is misguided if it was ever real. The U.S. Open has always been considered the most brutal examination. Erin Hills (2017) cannot be placed into that group any more than can Congressional (2011).

W.C. Fownes Jr., son of Oakmont's founder, U.S. Amateur champion, and playing captain of the first American Walker Cup team once said:

The virility and charm of the game lies in its difficulties. Keep it rugged, baffling, hard to conquer, otherwise we shall soon tire of it and cast it aside ... And so with the putting greens ... Let the clumsy, the spineless and the alibi artist stand aside.

- Pleasing the players has never been a good idea. That was firmly established by the U.S.G.A. in 1895 at Shinnecock Hills [see THE GOLF LETTER, Dec 2016]. Before the opening round, a group of all-knowing competitors comprised of white men mostly from Great Britain and New England, learned that John Shippen, a young man whose father was a black Presbyterian minister and whose mother was a Shinnecock Indian, had been admitted to the U.S. Open competitive field. A threat was made by the objectors: If forced to play with Mr. Shippen, they would withdraw from the competition.



U.S.G.A. President Theodore Havemeyer met with the objectors and made his argument succinctly: a.) an *open* competition would be held; b.) in order for it to be an open competition, applications were accepted from all qualified individuals; c.) to limit the field on any basis would invalidate the open definition; d.) it was the objectors' unquestioned right to choose to compete or not; and e.) if Mr. Shippen chose to play and if he were the only competitor in the field, Mr. Shippen would be the U.S. Open Champion.

Everyone played.

The players will always grumble and, if they are not complaining, they have not been properly tested or they are fearful of losing their invitation to the Masters. The idea of having to justify to the players what the golf association is doing with the money earned from the U.S. Open is preposterous. What do the players do with their money?

• The U.S.G.A. has lost its way. With press releases and statistics they defend the premise that the performance aspects of the game, primarily distance, are not out of control and then encourage that nonexistent increased performance with the Erin Hills set up. Which way is it? Are we supposed to believe that chocolate milk comes from brown cows?

Erin Hills and Brooks Koepka will always be historically tied. Did Mr. Koepka's U.S. Open victory come with an asterisk? Erin Hills was always going to be a bit dodgy when elevated into the exclusive company of Pebble Beach, Oakmont, Olympic, Shinnecock, &c. As

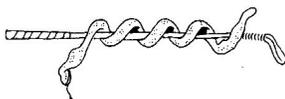
a newcomer, Erin Hills deserved a better introduction, but it had the misfortune of running into a determining string of events that took place years before and far away from Wisconsin.

• While the easing of the U.S. Open test at Erin Hills resulted in the setting of many new records, it will be next year at Shinnecock Hills where records will be shamelessly broken. Mr. Davis, who controls the U.S. Open setup, has already added 500 yards, which will mean nothing to the distance-enhanced professional field that can reach 675-yard holes with two 3-woods. More degrading to the U.S. Open test is that Mr. Davis is already widening Shinnecock's fairways.

• As in so many areas of our popular society, money is the culprit at the center of the U.S.G.A.'s administrative meandering. The primacy of money has morphed the golf association that was run by amateurs protecting the amateur essence of the game into a corporate deity directed by a CEO, with a salary approaching a million dollars, who finds it necessary to appease golf professionals and the popular culture that glorifies them.

In the new usage of our language, popular culture has blurred the concepts of money with excellence. THE URBAN DICTIONARY, a source of slang, or cultural words or phrases, not typically found in standard dictionaries, defines the current use as this:

Money: Of unusually high quality; very good; excellent: "*This wine is money*"; Majestic; imposing: "*Michael Jordan is money*." Rich; luxurious: "*Your apartment is money*."



For M.O.B.:

The U.S. Open was so money.

URBAN DICTIONARY
a random application

Yours vy truly,

Gary A. Galyean
Editor & Publisher

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