

Ponce VII, Palm Springs 2009

Background and Prelude

The 7th Annual Ponce de Leon Invitational forged its own identity under the strong leadership of 2009 Chairman Jeremy Bird and Chairman Emeritus, Neil Thomson. In an unprecedented, secretive move, Bird and Thomson decided to stage an 8-on-8, two team Ryder Cup format in a state that had not yet hosted a Ponce: the 16 of us took it out to sunny and beautiful Palm Springs, California!!! Months ago during the planning process, we followed some sage advice from a Friend of the Ponce, Matt Ginella -- the Senior Travel Editor at Golf Digest. One will recall that it was Mr. Ginella who chronicled the 6th Annual PDL at Sea Island in a full-page feature in the April 2008 issue of Golf Digest. Mr. Ginella had a personal relationship with the President of La Quinta Resort & Club, Mr. Davis Sezna, and urged us to take our tournament out to the "Western Home of Golf in America." La Quinta is the venerable, historic venue which serves host to the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic, a long-time tradition on the PGA Tour. La Quinta has recently undergone extensive renovations as a Waldorf-Astoria property, and my early telephone conversations with Mr. Sezna quickly convinced me that this would be a worthy venue for our cherished event. The resort's Old World Spanish charm, its hacienda-style decor, its authentic Mexican restaurant on-site, with rambling casitas surrounding heated pools --well, that imagery along with world-class golf (both at La Quinta and its neighboring PGA West golf Mecca) had Chairman Bird and me fired up. Coupling that with expected weather of full sunshine and 70+ degrees, we were hooked.

Chairman Bird and I had nothing against the traditional 4 teams of 4-players per team as the framework for this '09 tournament. However, around the time Boo Weekley, Anthony Kim and the Americans were pounding the Euros at Valhalla during the 2008 Ryder Cup, my mind began to wander. What about 8-on-8 for this year? What if we introduced a format that we could perhaps play each time the U.S. pros hosted the Euros in the Ryder Cup -- thereby not abandoning our unique 4 team format -- but rather once every 4 years or so, we would pay tribute to perhaps the best team golf event in the world. Furthermore, I did some research only to discover that the greater Palm Springs area had in fact hosted a Ryder Cup back in the days of Sinatra, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby's Clambake. We knew that the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic was set to host its 50th Annual tournament the week after we played there (what a nice coincidence) -- but yes, even more serendipitously, in fact, the exclusive and prestigious Eldorado Country Club hosted the 1959 Ryder Cup!!! Eldorado was one of the older, more established clubs in the Coachella Valley. Located in Indian Wells, it claims George H.W. Bush as a member, and President Eisenhower once resided along its fairways in his later years. Tom Fazio re-worked the course in 2003, and I did not see one blade grass out of place during my eventual tour of the club. With all of those factors coming together, Chairman Bird and I decided that playing a Ryder Cup, two-team event would be the perfect wrinkle for the 7th installment. As a further nuance, we decided to keep this format a secret until Thursday Night's Opening Ceremonies. To tribute the '59 Cup, the teams would be named after the two Captains: Team Sam Snead and Team Dai Rees. So, we set about ordering 8 "peach/soft peach" color shirts for the Snead team and 8 "Capri/white" color shirts for the Rees team. We selected the teams, mixing some players that never got to be teammates prior to this year, as well as re-uniting some folks as well. On paper, the two teams' handicap indices were almost identical (approximately 11.0). We would then go on to distribute the shirts and announce the two teams on Thursday night, with the Masters theme music humming off an I-pod in the background.

As fate would have it, my father-in-law (Dr. Richard Tyler) is lifelong friends with one of Eldorado's members, Dr. Jack Frost. That connection enabled me to contact Dr. Frost well in advance of the tournament, and he his wife Mimi invited and took me in a day early prior to the PDL, in their beautiful Indian Wells home. It was on that Wednesday that I got the personal tour of the course, clubhouse, and grounds. I took special note of the red clay tennis courts, the Frank-Lloyd Wright-type architecture of the clubhouse and its manicured lawns. That Wednesday night, the Frosts invited 3 great friends of mine -- John McAllister, John Klim, Muscie Garnett: all fellow PDL players: -- and me to dine on California sand dabs, filets, bottles of vino, and cappuccino ice cream in the elegant Eldorado dining room. What a treat it was. One could almost hear echoes of old Hollywood glamour as we strolled the club's hallways after dinner, noting Bing Crosby's name on a plaque as the club's first club champion in 1958!

Dr. Frost would then go on to set up a return visit for the full field of players to Eldorado on Friday evening --where the club's Director of Golf, Terry Beardsley, kept the pro shop open late and gave a private presentation to our group replete with Ryder Cup memorabilia and the official, one-of-a-kind gold replica of the 1959 Ryder Cup Trophy. Simply fantastic!

Practice Round and Opening Ceremony

Our Thursday practice round was played at PGA West's Greg Norman course -- a fine desert track that got everyone acclimated to the pristine conditions. Only Chairman Bird and I knew the composition of the teams as teams would not be announced until that night. Friendly side bets ensued and lively conversation predicting the team formats was being bandied about. Our round will perhaps best be remembered by many of us getting Blackberry updates of a US Airways commercial plane going down in the Hudson River, minutes after take-off from LaGuardia Airport in New York City. The Charlotte-bound flight had 150+ passengers on board and we all feared the worst -- pretty surreal moment as some of our compadres were still traveling in by air to come in for our tournament. By our back 9 that day, we learned of the heroic efforts of Capt. Sully Sullenberger's emergency water landing miraculously resulting in zero fatalities! Apparently, a flock of geese had collided with the plane, knocking out both engines, requiring Capt Sullenberger to quickly tell all to "brace for impact" as he made the awesome landing. Another parallel crossed my mind later that night -- how ironic that the 1959 British Ryder Cuppers had a harrowing flight themselves en route to Palm Springs from Los Angeles prior to the tournament. Severe turbulence resulted in elevation drops of 4,000 feet, requiring an emergency landing back in LA and a subsequent bus trip for the understandably frightened British squad. On a further historical note, the 1959 Ryder Cup marked the last time a visiting British Ryder Cup traveled by sea to the States, despite this air travel scare in California immediately prior to the '59 matches.

The Thursday night Opening Ceremonies was a blast. Chairman Bird and I welcomed the group to the Tennis Library on La Quinta's property -- one of the older buildings which gave a vintage feel around the grounds of the resort, which was first opened in 1926. With Heinekens flowing and Sinatra tunes in the background, we announced the teams, discussed the format, and welcomed our two rookies, Courtland Weisleder and John Allen Roberts. To cap off the evening, the aforementioned Davis Sezna, along with his wife, dropped in to welcome our group and had us chuckling with old golf war stories. Hysterically, Mr. Sezna was "called out" by a frantic, incoming La Quinta staffer who threatened to tow the vehicle that was illegally parked outside the Tennis Library. So, as the group is discovering Mr. Sezna's incredible business background and learning of his membership to America's most elite clubs, the President of the resort is getting hassled by one of his own unknown, entry-level employees! It made for quite a scene. On the way out, Mr. Sezna invited our group for a "round of drinks on him" at Ernie's Bar after our Saturday 36 -- an incredibly generous offer that he honored the following evening.

Round I: Match Play

Now, to our tournament. On Friday morning, after many of the players loosened their muscles in the hot tubs and heated pools located immediately outside their respective casitas, we played at La Quinta's Mountain Course. It was a great track and well-suited for our 2 man match-play round. This was the only round of the 4 competitive rounds where the pairings were established prior to tournament play. In a great wrinkle, Bird and I planned it so that the other 3 rounds' pairings would be set up the evening prior to the matches in a draft-style format, led by Team Sam Snead's Captain Wes Battle and Team Dai Rees's Captain, John McAllister. Neither team would realize it until later, but the Friday's matches ended up pivotal to the final outcome. This was the round where Snead flexed its muscles, winning 3 out of 4 matches, and halving the 4th match. With each match worth 2 points, Snead hit the ground running with a commanding 7-1 lead at Friday's end. A funny barb from Friday's round-- Ponce Rookie John Allen Roberts, an accomplished golfer holding a 6 handicap, put the Mountain into play on the Mountain course. On the 3rd tee box, he belted a drive cutting it too close to the Rocky Mountains immediately adjacent to the hole. The four players heard it hit the huge rock formation, only to lose sight of the Titleist for a good 4-5 seconds. Then, after more than a realistic pause, JAR heard a whizzing sound coming

directly for his head! The ball thankfully missed him but then ricocheted directly into their golf cart, landing incredibly in the plastic ball holder on the cart's dashboard. Only at a Ponce!

Two of the four matches ended by the 16th green but two came down to the 18th green and the last putt. If Team Dai Rees could make a few putts, they could cut the deficit to 5-3 but if Snead made a few, an 8-0 sweep remained a possibility. Dai Rees' Klim and Weisleder were 1-down to Battle and Wainscott as they dueled on the Par 5-18th. With Klim 10 feet short of the green in 2, Battle rested 100 yards out in the fairway in 3. After Battle hacked a wedge to 12 feet, Klim chipped to within 6 feet of the hole and a 6 foot putt from a well-deserved half. Battle rolled in the 12 footer for par though, putting a lot of pressure on Klim's 6 footer. Klim made a nice stroke, thought it was down, and watched as it lipped out. Snead would be 3-3. In the final grouping, Garnett-Rankin was All Square with Aide-Hollowell with the last to play. Setting up a classic showdown, all four players had 10-20 feet for birdie and the match win. After some great efforts, especially by Rankin and Aide, they would tap in for 4 Pars and a Half, the only one of the round.

After the aforementioned tour at Eldorado on Friday evening, the 16 of us congregated at The Beer Hunter, the quintessential sports bar near our resort. The PDL group paid no heed to the flat screen Golf Channel's HD coverage of the Sony Hawaiian Open, nor did we spend much time gazing up near the ceiling where autographed PGA Tour bags adorned the vaulted ceilings. No, we took it out to the outdoor patio and huddled with our respective teams to match up the pairings for both Round 2's Pinehurst Alternate Shot, and Round 3's Four Man Scramble. Great drama ensued as the pairings were unveiled, tee time by tee time.

Saturday: 36 Holes

Saturday morning's 7:00am tee time came bright and early to our group. It filled me with great pride though, as no matter the choice in level of revelry and venue of the Friday nightlife, all 16 of us piled in the La Quinta's shuttles at 6:10am to make our way to PGA West. We were the first golfers through the newly-opened clubhouse at PGA West, which serves both the Stadium Course and the Nicklaus Tournament course, our venues for Rounds 2 and 3, respectively. Dawn's first light greeted us at the chilly range, after guys had their fill of coffee and breakfast burritos at the spectacular new clubhouse coffee bar.

This is our second year of playing Pinehurst Alternate Shot -- a stroke play variation on a USGA-sanctioned format that 2008 Chairman Michael Palmore deftly introduced at Sea Island a year previous. Again, Team Sam Snead won 3 of the matches and a bonus point in the morning to increase its lead heading to the afternoon Scramble to 14-3. The top rounds of the morning were posted by McAllister/Garnett with a 2 under Par 70 followed by Hollowell and Palmore's 1-over 73 and Bird and Battle's 5-over 77, who lost by 7 to the top team of the morning, McAllister and Garnett.

Everyone welcomed the camaraderie associated with the afternoon Scramble round at PGA West's Nicklaus Tournament course. A quick note before I get too far into the report, and perhaps this should have been stated at the outset. The weather for all 5 rounds was absolutely SPECTACULAR. Each day the highs reached into the low 80s, and we never saw a cloud all weekend. Surrounded by mountains, the lush green fairways almost looked fake -- it was that gorgeous out there. Interestingly, and perhaps as a testament to how little separated the teams this year, all 4 of the scramble foursomes finished at an identical -7 (65) on the Nicklaus Tournament course. Team Dai Rees needed maybe two more putts to fall to climb back in the match but all four teams would tie. Those points split evenly between the teams, and when the dust settled Saturday night, Sam Snead held a commanding lead over Dai Rees, 17-6.

However, Sunday Singles loomed and all players were well aware that 16 points were up for grabs in this all-important finale, to be played starting at 10:00am on Sunday, again on the magical Nicklaus Tournament course. The newly opened Ernie's Bar, atop the clubhouse overlooking Nicklaus Tournament #18, served as perfect venue for our Captains' huddles and pairings for the Sunday rounds.

With fires blazing from pits on the patio, Sezna's courtesy drinks flowing, one could not picture a better 19th hole than Ernie's! Mathematically of course, Dai Rees was still in the tournament -- and our hazy math eventually deduced that they would have to win 7 of 8 Singles matches to hoist the Fountain of Youth Cup as champions, and thus enjoy the free steak dinner at Arnold Palmer's Restaurant on Sunday night.

Many of us were treated to a plethora of golf war stories from the ever-gracious Davis Sezna as we indulged Fat Tire draught brews and liberally-poured cocktails at Ernie's. Mr. Sezna proudly pointed to a large photograph of Jack Nicklaus and proclaimed how that shot was taken after The Golden Bear had enjoyed 3 such Fat Tire ales, overlooking his beautiful Tournament course design at PGA West! It was at this occasion that I informed Mr. Sezna of my plan to for the Ponce to pay tribute to his late son Davis G. "Deeg" Sezna, Jr., who lost his life at the World Trade Center during the 9/11 attacks. The elder Sezna gave me his blessing for us to contribute our funds to have a paver installed at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum on the grounds where the World Trade Center buildings once stood. (For a complete account of this tribute, please see other attachments and letters in this website). I am in awe by his optimism and courageous character in the face of such personal adversity and family tragedy.

After a boisterous Saturday Happy Hour session at Ernie's where the Singles pairings were drafted, the group of 16 made our way back to La Quinta's Adobe Grill. This was an authentic Mexican restaurant, with table-side-made guacamole and margaritas flowing. All of us sat atop the upstairs outdoor patio, fireside, with visions of Sunday birdies dancing in our heads. The food was tremendous! The Adobe experience was marred only by a freak incident where long time Poncer Andrew "The Scotsman" Hollowell lost his wallet at the bar. Many, including the management, suspected it was stolen by the staff, but alas, it was never found -- one would think that the staff would have finally returned it to him, given Hollywood's gracious imbibing of the Petron. This incident "forced" Hollowell to stay an extra day in the desert oasis of La Quinta while his passport was shipped to him so he could travel back to Charleston. If memory serves me, a few folks hit the town that evening, but the majority took it a little easier, knowing that the all-important Sunday round was ahead.

Sunday Singles

Ah, Sunday Singles at the Ponce. Another postcard 80 degree day welcomed the golfers at PGA West's Nicklaus Tournament range. There was the usual hushed tone over the range as the players grooved their swings, readying for their mid-morning tee slot. Some guys whispered of a Sunday breakfast and consult with Jesper Parnevik -- would the Swedish pro be able to impart any wisdom on our players? Nerves were rattling on the first tee, and really this is the best moment of the Ponce for many players who love real competition. But just like in 1959, it was Sam Snead's team that proved to be too much for Dai Rees. As stated previously, Team Dai Rees needed to win 7 of 8 to take home the Fountain of Youth Trophy, but it was not to be. Sam Snead actually expanded its margin, by winning 4 out of 8 matches and halving one -- to add 9 points to its impressive total. Final tally: Team Sam Snead 26, Team Dai Rees 13. Of note, the 2009 Chairman, Jeremy Bird, lost his first ever Singles match to a gritty opponent, Muscie Garnett 4&3 (the day's most lopsided match)-- who himself has built a fabulous career Singles resume over his 7 years of Ponce play. It needs to be recorded that Chairman Bird did an amazing job running this tournament, adding his own stamp to tournament lore by introducing this unique format and venue. Personally, I succumbed on 18 to lose by one, after squaring my match with Californian Scott Winn on the penultimate hole. With the faint voices of Troy Aikman and Joe Buck in the background from Ernie's bar above the 18th green (broadcasting the conclusion of the Arizona Cardinals beating the Philadelphia Eagles), I missed a 20 footer that I had to make to possibly forge a tie. But word had trickled around the course that Snead was leading in enough matches to secure the title, so my personal disappointment quickly faded over the Santa Rosa Mountains. In my foursome, 2009 MVP Bill Wainscott (a 21 handicapper) beat out the rookie Courtland Weisleder (an 18 handicap) in an entertaining match full of twists, turns, and witty trash-talk. In other close action, Michael Palmore held off a storming Jamie Rankin, who at one point was 3 down on the back nine to win one up. Henry Massie showed some of Dai Rees' heart, coming back from 3 down with 3 to play to halve his match with Michael Aide, who remains winless in 5 attempts (0-3-2). In two even handicap matches, Wes Battle would surrender a 2 hole lead to

John Klim at the turn to surrender the 2 points to Klim 2&1 and rookie John Allen Roberts took down John McAllister 2&1. The widest margin of the day was 4&3.

Champions' Dinner

The group gathered at our 19th hole and tallied the scores. The team that played the best won -- but I will say that Team Dai Rees showed great class and sportsmanship in defeat. The Pittsburgh Steelers ousted the Baltimore Ravens in High Definition to reach the Super Bowl, and the barmaids stayed busy with our orders in the late afternoon gloaming. Then it was back to La Quinta to get freshened up and a dip in the pool, and then on to Arnold Palmer's Restaurant (5 minutes from our resort) for the Champions Dinner. We were shown to the reserved, private dining room -- the British Open Room. Speeches, toasts, great steaks and wine ensued. I will say that the service at Palmer's was the best of any of the 7 previous Awards Dinner -- kudos! Bill Wainscott was voted MVP and Scott Winn was named the Spirit Award winner. I named Richard Massie the 2010 Chairman, and he will do a great job carrying the torch. Female members from the Golf Channel's production staff were at the bar -- in town early for the upcoming Bob Hope; their interest piqued at our tournament, and piqued perhaps at some of our players! On multiple occasions, we were interrupted by female "fans" who tried to enter our room -- thinking we must be with Microsoft or some other corporate gig. But nothing could be further from the truth. This tournament is truly Corinthian. We are all out-of-pocket -- and to have 16 guys venture to the California desert in this Recession is a testament to the tournament and the camaraderie -- the tradition continues to build. It is amateur-driven; it is real competition, against a social backdrop that gives everyone freedom to unwind. It is friendships renewed and friendships strengthened.

Until Next Year,

Neil D. Thomson

Chairman Emeritus