

U.S. Bottoms Out; for Europeans, It's Bottoms Up

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By Thomas Boswell

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STRAFFAN, Ireland Before deciding, on a whim of jet-lagged insanity, to pick America to win the Ryder Cup, I should've remembered Samuel Johnson's quip to James Boswell on his lifelong unwillingness to visit Ireland, even to see Dublin.

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"Worth seeing, yes," Johnson said, "but not worth going to see."

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Many eyes wished they hadn't seen what they came here to watch. Americans should have been issued a blindfold at the gate Friday and a last Cigarette before the lopsided singles matches began Sunday at the K Club. That K now stands for "krushed" in results, image and dignity. The one consensus before this event was that Europe couldn't possibly duplicate the record-setting 18 1/2 -9 1/2 drubbing it laid on the U.S. two years ago at Oakland Hills, a rout that was supposedly a perfect storm of bad American team chemistry, poor U.S. captaincy and brilliant European play.

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As it proved, that consensus was, in a sense, correct. Europe would Have won this 36th Ryder Cup by an even more insane score -- 19-9 -- except That generous Paul McGinley conceded a putt of 30 feet on the 18th green to J.J. Henry, turning his near-certain European victory into a mere halve. Thanks to his Irish decency, the final score ended 18 1/2 -9 1/2.

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Officially, the final margin was the same. But the humiliation for American golf, and the reevaluations it may force on this event and its format, were far more significant than the embarrassment of '04. One question almost asks itself: Is America slipping back to the second-rank status that Europe held in the 1960s and '70s in international head-to-head play?

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"I mean, we've won five of the last six," said Colin Montgomerie, who began Europe's 8 1/2 -3 1/2 best-ever singles performance with a victory over David Toms. "If it hadn't been for a very difficult Sunday in Brookline [in '99], it would be six in a row. That's pretty dominant. We have a superb strength and depth in Europe that we haven't had before."

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Piped up Sergio Garcia, "And I hope we won't be asked anymore if the Nationwide Tour [in the U.S.] is the second-best tour in the world."

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The American team finds itself fresh out of excuses. Since '04, the United States streamlined its qualifying standards to ensure that more hot players, rather than aging favorites, made the squad. Team captain Tom Lehman made few mistakes in handling a solid U.S. team that included the top three players in the world -- Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson and Jim Furyk -- a major champion in David Toms and two other players in the world

Top 24.

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The players Lehman sent to the post were a truly representative cross-section of America's best golfers. Even his four little-known rookies played better than expected, especially Zach Johnson (1-2-1) and Henry (0-0-3).

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Yet, in a format that seems to put American players extremely ill at ease, the United States was absolutely squashed, becoming the first Ryder Cup team ever to lose all five sessions. Wake up; lose. Have lunch; lose. Then

sleep and repeat. A conclusion, which has been building since 1985, has crystallized in the 21st century. In team play, a perfectly valid form of golf, Europe is not just better, but overwhelmingly so. Only that splendid comeback in '99, aided by an unsporting heckling crowd, has obscured it.

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Lehman insisted that his players were "prepared" and played "their best" with "heart and courage." Because it's presumably true, that only makes these back-to-back 18 1/2 -9 1/2 scores more damaging to the PGA Tour's reputation. Asked if more such wipeouts might send this mega-money-making event "back in the other direction" toward lessened popularity, Lehman said: "That sounds a little insulting. . . . Things have cycles. There will be a time when we'll be sitting here saying to the Europeans, 'Is this [event] in danger of becoming a little bit in trouble because the American team is on top?'

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"That will happen."

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Whatever the glorious situation may be for the American team on some Future day, the lasting image of their slapstick performance here came on the seventh hole of Woods's match. Tiger's caddie, Steve Williams, slipped on a rock and dropped Woods's 9-iron into the depths of the River Liffey. With the U.S. team already hopelessly behind, Tiger could only laugh (for the only time all week). He played on with 13 clubs until a wet-suited diver returned his club at the 15th hole. Ultimately, Woods won, 3 and 2, over Robert Karlsson and ended with a winning record (3-2).

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Almost inconceivably, seven Americans combined for zero wins and a combined record of 0-14-9: Phil Mickelson (0-4-1), Chris DiMarco and David Toms(both 0-3-1) as well as winless Chad Campbell, Brett Wetterich, VaughnTaylor and Henry.

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By contrast, the same core of stars has led the last three European winners: Garcia (11-3-1), Lee Westwood (10-2-3), Colin Montgomerie (8-2-3) and Darren Clarke (7-3-3). All are extreme extroverts, huggers and partiers, long on bravado, following in the tradition of Seve Ballesteros. Their charisma allows less flamboyant personalities, such as Paul Casey, Luke Donald and Jose Maria Olazabal (a combined 8-0-2 in this Cup), to contribute as needed.

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The clubhouse scene after this win showed how much European momentum America now faces. Ireland's Darren Clarke, whose wife, Heather, died of cancer last month, received enormous support here. However, after plenty of tears, he eventually found the heart to celebrate. On the K Club's upper veranda, he chugged a pint of Guinness straight down. Not to be outdone, captain Ian Woosnam duplicated the feat. This was only remarkable because Woosnam had previously chugged champagne until he bubbled over, spewing Moet out his nose. An hour later, Woosnam, dressed in a splendiferous pink suit, had to make a speech to assembled dignitaries, including past U.S. presidents. The Welshman was sober and barely misspoke a word. Now that's clutch.

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The final Ryder Club news conference dissolved into the European team's normal pub-style vaudeville show.

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"Ian took 10 seconds to down that pint. Too long," Clarke said.

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"That's a 10th quicker than you did, and I'll prove it now if you want to get them out on the table," Woosnam said.

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"Just mind your age here," Clarke retorted.

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"There's nothing like experience," the distinguished captain said.

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"If you keep up with me, you'll be doing okay, don't worry about that," Clarke said.

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"We'll see about that," Woosnam said.

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"There's a challenge here," Garcia crowed.

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"Guinness, that's why he picked me for the team, no other reason whatsoever," Clarke grinned.

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"We're going to have a party, boys," Woosnam beamed.

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"What was the question?" Clarke said.

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Unfortunately, the question has become plain: How can a bunch of tight Americans ever beat this European dirty dozen?

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