

Ryder Cup: As Intense as it Gets in Golf.

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History doesn't often announce itself. There are rarely signposts that say, "Pay attention, this is important." Rather, it's most often glimpsed in the rearview mirror, best appreciated after the fact, gazed at across the luxury of time and distance.

In 1993, Tom Watson, the captain of the winning U.S. Ryder Cup team that year at The Belfry, said: "Used to be we'd come over here, have a couple of cocktail parties, kick their butts and go home. It's not like that any more."

Boy did he get that right. By 1993, the Ryder Cup had grown testy. In 1991, it was the contentious "War by the Shore" at Kiawah Island. And The Belfry had an incident in which Watson refused to allow the Yanks to autograph the programs of European players at the opening-night dinner.

From 1927, when the biennial competition started, through 1983 the United States was 23-2-1. There really wasn't all that much to get excited about and no one did. The Ryder Cup happened and not many paid attention.

But since 1985, it's been 10-4-1 in favor of Europe, including the last three. It's seems as if the cocktail party has a new host and now the world watches in large numbers.

There are two questions raised by the turn of events over the last 30 years. First, why is the Ryder Cup so compelling? And second, why has Europe become so dominating?

Asked in 1993 about the growing stature of the Ryder Cup, Davis Love III, a competitor then and U.S. captain when the competition starts this week at Hazeltine, said: "It's like the America's Cup [sailing race]. When the United States lost, Americans asked two questions: What is it? And why did we lose it?"

The fact that for 30 years the United States has been trying to recapture its former dominance is one explanation of the heightened interest in the Ryder Cup.

The other explanation is the format. Not only is the national element involved – the United States vs. Europe – but it's also match play. Nothing is more intense in golf than match play. It is pure golf.

In stroke play, I'm competing against 155 others. In match play, I'm playing you, or my partner and I are playing you and your partner. It is personal. I decide whether to give you a putt. I decide whether to have you mark your ball. In match play, you can get under each other's skin in a way that doesn't happen in stroke play.

And why is it that Europe been so successful recently? For one thing, the game has grown in Europe. Not only do players come from Britain, they are from Spain, Sweden, Italy, Germany and other countries on the continent. The talent pool is broader and deeper.

Another explanation for Europe's success involves the format. They are much more used to team competitions – being on national teams in Europe is a huge deal for amateur golfers – and they are much more used to match play.

There is also the expectation factor. Somehow, no matter how many times Europe wins the Ryder Cup they manage to come in acting like they are the underdog. In a way, American fans help create this edge.

There is a feeling among Americans that the U.S. is supposed to win – at everything. Because of that, the Yanks bear the extra burden of expectation. Add to that the fact that the European players truly do view the Ryder Cup as the fifth major and they have a significant psychological edge.

Look at Colin Montgomerie, Lee Westwood, Sergio Garcia, Ian Poulter and Jesper Parnevik, for example. They make putts in the Ryder Cup they don't make to win major championships. Those five have combined for zero majors yet they have been kick-ass Ryder Cup players. His Ryder Cup record is a huge reason Monty made it into the World Golf Hall of Fame without a major title.

Again, credit – or blame – match play for that. In match play, you can usually try to make every putt without fear of the 4-footer coming back. In stroke play – the format of the majors – you have to keep hitting the ball until it gets in the hole.

Good news for the Americans is the fact the NCAA has gone to a match play for its team finals. That will produce a new generation of Americans schooled in the format. Forget about any task force to figure out how to get the U.S. on a winning track, match play in the NCAAs could be what turns things around for the Americans in the Ryder Cup.

Meantime, just sit back and enjoy. The Ryder Cup is the best made-for-TV event in pro golf. It's much more enjoyable from an armchair at home where the broadcast can take you to all the matches than it is viewed in person where you are fighting with thousands of others to see one match.

If recent history tells us anything, this will be a compelling spectacle, no matter who wins. Thirty years ago, the Ryder Cup became the most intense event in golf. The rearview tells us that. Now a new blank page in the history book lies before us. I can't wait to see what gets penciled in this week.