

T



BY  
S. MURALI

# MASTERS OF THE GAME

The Rolex brand shows amazing clout in golf with spontaneous surprise for photojournalists at the British Open at St Andrews. Its senior strategic adviser believes it is the strong association it has with organisations like the American Junior Golf Association that has helped make Rolex synonymous with golf.

Imagine playing a golf tournament and then receiving your prize from Arnold Palmer, Gary Player, Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson.

No, the tournament in question was not a Major. And, for the record, even in Majors, you don't get your prize from four men who have won a combined 35 Majors.

The tournament in question was amateur, organised by Rolex for the photojournalists gathered for this year's British Open at St Andrews.

The golf took place on the Tuesday before the Open began, at the nearby Castle Course at St Andrews.

On Wednesday, the photographers were told to assemble at the Rolex hospitality tent to receive their prizes.

The only thing is that they had no idea who would be presenting them with their awards.

Said Mike Erhmann, whose team finished first in the competition: "We were just blown away. I still can't explain how incredible that was.

"We see them a lot out there, but meeting them in person is something else."

The top three teams, along with the novelty prize winners, were also handed the actual Claret Jug, which is given to the winner of the Open every year, and posed for pictures with Palmer, Player, Woods and Mickelson.

They had to return the Claret Jug, of course, but left the room with pictures and memories that are sure to last a lifetime.

Said Jean-noel Bioul, Rolex's senior strategic adviser: "We decided to surprise them and they knew nothing about it when they came to the hospitality area.

"It was a spontaneous decision on our part. Also, we feel that the photographers are sometimes not recognised as the way they should be recognised."

The fact that a "spontaneous" decision could bring the likes of Palmer, Player, Woods and Mickelson into the Rolex tent at the same time speaks volumes about the amazing clout the brand holds in golf.

Other players who are Rolex testimonees (ambassadors) include Jack Nicklaus, Tom Watson, Bernhard Langer, Fred Couples and current stars Jordan Spieth, Rickie Fowler, Adam Scott, Tseng Ya-ni and Lydia Ko.



Winners of the Rolex Photographers' Golf Day Peter Morrison, Mike Erhmann, Streeter Lecke were given their prizes by surprise guests and Rolex Testimonees Tiger Woods, Arnold Palmer, Phil Mickelson and Gary Player.

In the past, the late Seve Ballesteros and former World No. 1 Greg Norman were also part of the Rolex family.

How does Rolex decide who gets in?

Bioul said it all started with Rolex founder Hans Wilsdorf, who invented the first waterproof wristwatch in the world, the Rolex Oyster, in 1926.

## FIRST TESTIMONEE

To prove its effectiveness, Wilsdorf essentially "recruited" his first testimonee by equipping Englishwoman Mercedes Gleitze with an Oyster when she swam the English Channel in 1927.

After that, men like Sir Edmund Hillary ascended Mount Everest with an Oyster Perpetual on his wrist.

Said Bioul: "Mr Wilsdorf was ahead of his time. He already started the association where the watch would be associated with great people."

In 1967, Rolex signed Palmer as a testimonee, a "formal arrangement", according to Bioul, as the American sensation had already been wearing the watch for some years.

Said Bioul: "Television changed everything. Now those guys like Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player were visible. So we got the big three to join us."

Players aside, though, the brand was quick to develop strong partnerships with golf's rul-

ing bodies like The Royal and Ancient, the US Golf Association and started sponsoring a host of amateur golf events to promote the game.

Bioul believes that it is the strong association the brand has with organisations like the American Junior Golf Association (AJGA) that has helped make Rolex synonymous with golf.

He said: "The purpose of the AJGA is to promote scholarship with young players anywhere in the world to study in US universities and we have been helping the AJGA by sponsoring tournaments since the 1980s.

"So you can imagine since then, all the players who went through the AJGA were exposed to the brand, from Mickelson to Woods. All of them.

"And so when down the road, you have a guy like Mickelson Fowler or Spieth, they knew about Rolex, because when they were 12 years old, 13, 14, they were playing the Rolex Tournament of Champions, which is an AJGA event. So the brand is already in their DNA. It is kind of a natural fit."

But Bioul explained that not all top players get into the fold automatically, as the company will assess potential candidates internally to see if the player matches Rolex's "values".

"And we have already identified five or six names who could become future stars of the game. I am not going to tell you, but we already know who they are," he said, with a smile.

photo courtesy of Rolex