

TORCHBEARERS

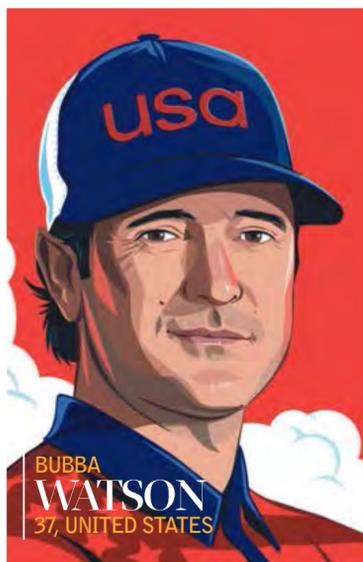
IN RIO, THESE GOLFERS ARE PLAYING FOR MORE THAN A PLACE IN HISTORY

BY JAIME DIAZ

hose who judge athletic excellence strictly on the basis of “faster, higher, stronger”

are

probably doubtful that golf is good for the Olympics. But anyone who has ever included “farther, straighter, fewer” in the criteria is likely to believe that the Olympics are good for golf. How much the game will benefit by its return — after 112 years — to the world’s greatest sporting event is to be determined. With the opening ceremony of the Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro on Aug. 5, we’re finally about to find out. The run-up to Rio hasn’t been smooth, in part because the world’s best players are used to tournament hosts acutely attuned to their preferences. But also because of real-life problems, the decision to go to Brazil has seen a lot of big names take a few extra waggles.



BUBBA WATSON
37, UNITED STATES

Most players main points of concern:
 ▶ Zika, the mosquito-transmitted virus that has been connected to birth defects, has everyone’s attention, especially men and women in childbearing years. At the time of publication, Louis Oosthuizen, Charl Schwartzel, Marc Leishman and Vijay Singh all cited Zika as the reason they dropped out, and Adam Scott admitted the virus was part of his decision not to play.

Jason Day — with two young children and stated plans for more — appeared to be hesitating, saying at the Memorial Tournament: “It’s difficult to say right now. We’re going to explore every avenue to make sure we make an educated decision before we go down there.”

The good news is, medical officials of the local organizing committee reported that there have been no known cases of Zika among the 17,000 athletes, staff and volunteers in 44 test events over several months before the Games. And with temperatures cooling in the Brazilian winter, mosquito incubation will go down drastically. Officials are predicting fewer than two-dozen cases of Zika among the half-million people expected to visit Rio for the Games.

▶ The major-championship schedule has been jammed to fit in the Olympics. The British Open and the PGA will be played only two weeks apart rather than the customary four, and the FedEx Cup, which will be followed almost immediately by the Ryder Cup, will start only two weeks after the men’s event in Rio ends. This was the primary reason Scott gave for passing.

▶ A more elaborate drug-testing protocol includes blood samples in addition to the urine samples that the US PGA Tour requires. As Olympic competitors, golfers have to provide their whereabouts to officials and, from July 24 to Aug 21, be subject to testing at any time. However, no golfers have cited the more stringent testing requirements as a reason not to play.

▶ Brazil’s political and economic turmoil might spark demonstrations that could disrupt the activities around Rio or even the competition.
 ▶ As for the actual golf, some players have been lukewarm on the format — 72 holes of individual medal play with no cut — for the men’s and women’s 60-player fields. Critics have called the decision an opportunity missed for variations that could’ve included match play, team play or pairs — even mixed pairs.

▶ And though they know better than to complain publicly, some pros don’t like playing when big prize money isn’t involved.

NEW BLOOD

But even with the obstacles, golf feels very good about the informed bet it made on itself in convincing the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to bring the sport back to the Summer Games at Rio and in 2020 in Tokyo.

Basically, the Olympics constitute golf’s ultimate “grow the game” play. The sport will be on the world’s biggest athletic stage, part of a telecast that will be viewed by as many as four billion people in more than 200 countries. Over 13 straight days, Golf Channel will provide more than 300 hours of coverage of the men and women’s tournaments, including 130 hours of live coverage, with the NBC golf team led by Johnny Miller, Nick Faldo, Judy Rankin and Anika Sorenstam. No-cut medal play was chosen because it would allow as many countries to be represented as possible, with as much potential exposure as possible. The goal isn’t to entertain the hardcore fan from mature golf markets as much as it is to lure new fans — especially young people — from among the millions around the world who have always been outside golf’s tent.

Nationalism is a powerful force for growth. A recent study found that

‘ACTUALLY, ANY MEDAL WOULD BE GREAT. I’D TAKE A BRONZE MEDAL OVER A THIRD AT AUGUSTA.’

85 countries that invest government money in sports do so only if the sport is in the Olympics. This means that after Rio, many developing nations will have a golf culture for the first time.

It’s anticipated that countries obsessed by Olympic achievement — China and Russia being the largest — will make huge investments to develop high-level talent. Jack Nicklaus, who helped the International Golf Federation (IGF) present the case for golf’s inclusion to the IOC, says he wouldn’t be surprised if China, where he has built 28 courses and has 11 more in development, “within the next 20 years had five of the top-10 players in the world.” While in India recently, Tiger Woods said that if Anirban Lahiri, a mainstay among the top 60 in the world the past two years, were to win a medal for his country, the sport would “explode” among that population of more than one billion.

LPGA golfers believe that women’s

golf has the most to gain from Olympic attention, and the leading stars are committed to doing their part. Lydia Ko will represent New Zealand, and despite her teenage assault on the Majors, says, “the Olympics will probably be my highest priority” in 2016. Making the South Korean women’s team has been the fiercest competition in the run-up to the Games, with as many as eight players in the top 15 on the Rolex Rankings vying for four places. LPGA Tour commissioner Mike Whan has happily begun referring to women’s golf by the prestige-enhancing label of “podium sport.” Says Stacy Lewis, who with Lexi Thompson is in line to represent Team USA: “I think we see the benefit a little bit more than the guys do.”

GOLDEN SLAMS

Though the value of a gold medal in golf is yet to be quantified, the question isn’t whether it will be special, but how special. Tennis, brought back to the Olympics in 1988 amid much naysaying after an absence of more than 60 years, has become prominent. The gold has taken on importance through its singles winners, a list



HENRIK STENSON
40, SWEDEN

that includes Andre Agassi and Rafael Nadal among the men, and Steffi Graf and Venus and Serena Williams among the women.

The so-called Golden Slam — the career Grand Slam plus Olympic gold, won by Agassi, Nadal, Graf and Serena Williams — could provide record-book incentives for Tiger Woods if he were to make a future Olympic team. And among the women, the Games could motivate Park In-bee of South Korea and Karrie Webb of Australia, who hold every Major other than the Evian, which just became one three years ago. Agassi told CNN that when he and Graf brought a sampling of their trophies



EMILIANO GRILLO
23, ARGENTINA



LYDIA KO
19, NEW ZEALAND

‘THE OLYMPICS WILL PROBABLY BE MY HIGHEST PRIORITY [IN 2016].’

to “professions day” at their children’s school in Las Vegas, “all the children just want to take that gold medal. They want to hold it, they want to touch it.”

Henrik Stenson who earlier this month won the British Open, his first Major, is bullish on the Olympics in part because, at 40, he isn’t sure he’ll get another chance. “Who knows how big the Olympic gold medal will grow in history, but I think winning this first one in the modern era is something you’ll be remembered for the rest of your life,” Stenson says. “Actually, any medal would be great. I’d take a bronze medal over third at Augusta.”

Such an attitude is appreciated by icons wistful over an opportunity they missed. Sorenstam had been retired for a year when she was part of the IOC presentation in 2009 and says that as she made the case for golf before the committee, she felt a strong urge to come back. Says Nicklaus:

“Wouldn’t you want to win a medal for your country, and to do what’s right for the game? I think of Fred Funk telling me he wanted to make the Presidents Cup team in South Africa so bad that he’d row a boat there. Well, if I were young enough to play in this year’s Olympics, he could have dropped me off in Brazil.” Gary Player, who says he would have “given anything” to be an Olympian, is blunt in his assessment of those who won’t: “People who are not excited to play in the Olympics have just been spoiled.”

Such reaction unfairly targets Scott, who is a young father and has always represented Australia faithfully and well. Swimming icon Dawn Fraser, winner of the 100-metre freestyle in three straight Olympics, accused her fellow Aussie of “not showing much for your country.”

TACTIC APPROVAL

The pressure to represent and perform will always be there in the Olympics. But in the case of the golfers eligible for Rio, the most commonly shared incentive is the anticipated thrill of being included and taking in the experience.

Traditionally considered nerdy “semi-athletes” compared to team-sport stars, golfers getting to the Olympics is a little like having the cool kids in high school finally invite them to their party. Even Nicklaus betrays a bit of that thinking when his time as an outstanding high school basketball player is mentioned. “I became a golfer because, first, I was an athlete,” he says. Arnold Palmer likes to tell about being on stage with baseball star Roger Maris before the presentation of the 1960 Hickok Belt for best athlete of the year. When Maris saw Palmer, he said derisively to the golfer, “What the hell are you doing here?” After Palmer was announced as the winner, he brushed by Maris on his way to the microphone and whispered, “What the hell are you doing here?”

Of course, today’s golfers have been athletically validated, by Woods and by disciplined training regimens that carve out lean muscle. In a role reversal, Tour players are now held up as models of athletic coordination and concentration by team-sport athletes who aspire to be better at golf. And some golfers even have Olympic roots. Jeev Milkha Singh’s father, Milkha Singh, finished fourth for India in the 400 metres at the 1960 Olympics in Rome. The parents of South Korea’s An Byeong Hun were medalists in table tennis at the Seoul Olympics in 1988. Before marrying Bubba Watson, Angie Ball was chosen for Canada’s Olympic women’s basketball team but couldn’t play because of injury. It’s doubtful that the golfers will feel as much like outsiders in Rio as they did in their adolescence.

Which will make it easier to do what they are really looking forward to: just hanging out. As the schedule goes, the men will get more time in the Olympic Village around the opening cere-

monies, and the women around the closing ceremonies.

“Sure, the Olympics are going to elevate our sport a bit into that more athletic realm,” says Ernie Els, who at 46, was hoping a late surge might qualify him to represent South Africa. “But I’d give my left toe just to be part of the whole spectacle. I love seeing and meeting these athletes, the absolute best in the world. I just want to see what they’re all about and learn from them. Can you imagine?”

MEDALLISTS

American Bubba Watson added, “Bottom line, I want to be an Olympic athlete,” he says. “Winning a gold, or any medal, would be a bonus. But watching and meeting the other athletes — that’s going to be the growing part for who I am as a person, and who I am as an athlete. That’s the true cake, and the icing would be a medal.”

Brooke Henderson, 18, was a youth-hockey goalie when she began dreaming of representing Canada, as she will as a golfer in Rio. “The Olympics is something that I’ve looked forward to almost my entire life,” she says. “As a young girl, I wanted to play, and I remember watching the Winter and Summer Games and watching the athletes, and the passion, the desire, the hard work that they had put in. And I wanted to be one of those athletes.”

NO REGRETS

Even with the withdrawals, it appears golf will have enough good players. The bigger question is: Will the golf that’s played matter?

“I’ve always loved the Olympics, and it’s going to be a great experience, the whole thing,” says Sergio Garcia of Spain. “Of course winning a medal would be amazing, but what I really hope I can do is influence kids, get them to want to play golf. That’s what’s going to make our game better.”

When Argentina’s Emiliano Grillo was told that countryman Angel Cabrera was sceptical that the Olympics in Rio would grow the game in South America, saying, “I won two Majors, and very little happened in my country,” the 23-year-old who has locked his spot for Rio begged to differ. “Cabrera might not see it, but he did a lot. More than he thinks,” Grillo says. “I know his winning the US Open in 2007 really influenced me. I thought, ‘If somebody from Argentina can do it, why not me?’ At the last Olympics, in London, an Argentine guy [Sebastián Eduardo Crismanich] won a gold medal in tae kwon do. It had a huge impact. That sport became a big deal in my country. That’s the way it works with the Olympics.”

For golf to work as an event, Rio de Janeiro has to come through, and there are legitimate worries. Then again, a lot of Summer Games have been problematic in the rush to be ready. Mexico City, Los Angeles, Barcelona, Beijing, Athens — each seemingly was overwhelmed with 11th-hour

problems but ultimately all came together (Barcelona and Los Angeles, brilliantly). How golf presents itself will matter, because next year the IOC will vote on whether to continue golf in 2024, where Los Angeles is making a major bid to be the host.

“Sure, in hindsight, things took longer to get done in Rio than we expected,” says Ty Votaw, the PGA Tour’s chief marketing officer and vice president of the IGF. “But bottom line, the world of golf got together like it never has before to get this done. And when the players get there, at some point they are going to feel goose bumps and the hair rising on the back of their neck, and they are going to know they are at the very pinnacle of sport, and they are going to realize, ‘This is what I can do in our sport’. And I believe they’re going to go back home and say, ‘It was worth it.’ If so, it will mean the Olympics will be very good for golf. Perhaps even to the point that golf will be deemed good for the Olympics. 🏆

‘WINNING A MEDAL WOULD BE AMAZING, BUT WHAT I REALLY HOPE I CAN DO IS INFLUENCE KIDS, GET THEM TO WANT TO PLAY.’



SERGIO GARCIA
36, SPAIN

Top photo: Choo Chwee Hui, courtesy of Audi