

Sports & Entertainment Spotlight

Golf's (Less Than) Triumphant Return to the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics?

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After a 112-year hiatus, golf is returning to the XXXI Olympiad at the Olympic golf course, Reserva de Marapendi, Barra da Tijuca, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.[1] The men's and women's individual events, slated to be held on August 11-14, 2016 and August 17-20, 2016, respectively, mark the first time golf has been an Olympic event since the 1904 Summer Olympics.[2] While winning a gold medal at the Olympic Games is typically viewed as reaching the apex of a given sport – see track and field, swimming, wrestling, gymnastics and figure skating as examples, the same is not true of other sports, such as baseball, with its World Series; tennis, with its Grand Slam tournaments; and soccer, with its World Cup. If some recent high-profile declinations of high-profile players, such as Adam Scott of Australia, to compete in the upcoming Olympics is any indication, golf squarely falls in the second camp: the Olympics and the national pride they inspire are of *de minimis* significance to the most accomplished, world-class golfers in the modern-day sporting era.[3] However, there are many highly accomplished golfers who are enthused about participating in the Summer Olympics and as golf becomes a more established sport in the Olympic schedule, the sport will likely benefit from its return to the Olympic Games.

The decisions to pass on participation made by certain highly-ranked golfers have gotten the most press attention. Scott, ranked No. 7 in the world; Louis Oosthuizen of South Africa, ranked No. 12 in the world; Charl Schwartzel of South Africa, ranked No. 23 in the world; and Vijay Singh of Fiji, ranked No. 253 in the world have all declined to participate in the Olympics. Based on the Olympic selection criteria, they were all likely qualifiers.[4] There are a myriad of reasons why top golfers could be avoiding competing at the Olympic Games, such as heightened drug-testing protocols and the “mundane” format, of “72 holes of stroke play, no team component.”[5] Singh cited the Zika virus in Brazil.[6] Rory McIlroy, Jason Day, Dustin Johnson and Jordan Spieth, the top four golfers in the world, have also declined to participate, citing the Zika virus as well.[7] Scott cited personal reasons, as well as noting the tight scheduling, with the golf majors both prior to and after the Olympics.[8] The “mind-numbing” schedule has been the most prevalent reason for the declinations.[9] Put simply, the 2016 Summer Olympics follow four big tournaments, including three major championships in Scotland, New Jersey and South America, in a seven-week period.[10]

Most importantly, Scott has been the most vocal golfer with the view that the majors are the golf tournaments that count, and the Olympics are insignificant for golf. Scott has been “on record for some time that he believes majors are the crowning achievement in the sport[,] and the Olympics should be reserved for those whose sole goal is that kind of glory every four years.”^[11] He also noted, “[Winning an Olympic medal] ‘is nothing I have ever dreamed of having[,] and it really doesn’t have any significance for golf.’”^[12] Scott then concluded, “I’m not really sure how just having another golf tournament is really going to enhance the game or grow the game any more than any other tournament just because it’s the Olympics.”^[13]

While golf officials did have seven years from the International Olympic Committee’s vote approving golf as an Olympic sport to engineer a majors schedule that works better with the Olympic schedule and failed to do so, they are nonetheless fully in support of golf’s inclusion in the Olympic Games as critical to the sport’s development.^[14] The sport’s leaders, such as those at the Professional Golfers Association Tour, United States Golf Association (“USGA”), The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews (R&A), The Professional Golfers’ Association of America (PGA) and The Augusta National Golf Club, home to the annual Masters Tournament, extolled the benefits of winning gold at the Olympics.^[15] For example, Masters Chairman Billy Payne commented, “We believe our game’s visibility will be dramatically elevated by the global platform that only the Olympics offer. . . . New audiences from all over the world, some for the very first time ever, will be exposed to our great sport and come to know and appreciate the amazing athletes and heroes in golf. From this greater visibility, we believe will evolve greater participation in our game, and it will be a certain beneficiary.”^[16] Further, on April 4, 2016, golf’s governing bodies gave golf in the Olympics their full support. Officials from the Masters, USGA, R&A, PGA and the Ladies Professional Golf Association announced that they would each extend an automatic invitation to their majors in 2017 to the winner of the gold medal.^[17]

However, despite these scheduling challenges, many elite players are enthused about the prospect of competing in the Olympics, relishing the thought of competing for their country, whether or not the Olympics are considered a “fifth major.”^[18] Bubba Watson, two-time Masters winner, concurred, “[An Olympic gold medal] would be a little bit bigger than a green jacket. . . . It’s more rare. The game of golf hasn’t seen it in years. And I get to keep that gold medal for life. I don’t have to give back after a year.” Henrik Stenson, No. 6 player in the world, agreed: “I’ll take a bronze medal over third at Augusta.”^[19] Stenson elaborated, “To compete there and have a chance to win a medal would be very special. . . . I think it’s going to be very special for the player who wins the gold medal to be the first to win since golf came back into the Olympics. It’s something you’ll be remembered for the rest of your life.”^[20] Rickie Fowler, the reigning Players champion and No. 5 worldwide, noted the uniqueness of the Olympics: “But to just have the chance to play in the Olympics would be pretty special. It’s something that I’ve always watched . . . growing up and thought about how cool it would be to walk in the opening ceremonies, the closing ceremonies and seeing everyone compete. But it was kind of unrealistic being that golf wasn’t a part of it.”^[21] In addition, Sergio Garcia of Spain (ranked No.

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13) and Martin Kaymer of Germany (ranked No. 53) took to social media to express their enthusiasm for the inclusion of golf in the summer Olympics.^[22] Also, Christina Kim of the United States remarked, “It’s going to be one of the biggest things to happen to women’s golf. . . .I think at some point every kid dreams of competing in the Olympics, but I’m not sure any of us ever thought we’d have the chance to do so through golf. And to represent your country as part of that experience would be the ultimate honor.”^[23] Melissa Reid of Great Britain noted, “I’d love to be a part of the Olympics. . . .[T]o be part of something as special as the Olympics would be the highlight of my career.”^[24]

Beyond winning gold medals, the inclusion of golf at the Summer Olympics can enhance the development of golf as a sport. For example, the new Olympic golf course, built at the Reserva de Marapendi in the Barra da Tijuca zone, represents a great hope for the development of golf in Brazil. Carlos Arthur Nuzman, President of the Rio de Janeiro Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games, remarked, “. . . [T]his course represents the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the sport. It will enable Rio to host important events in the international calendar and it will be an example of sustainability and preservation of an environmentally protected area. This course will be an excellent facility for the practice and development of golf and will inspire millions of youth across Brazil and the globe.”^[25] This is the general pro-Olympic agreement, that “getting golf into the games will release money toward Olympic team development in countries that previously never considered golf a priority. As a grow-the-game initiative, having golf in the most widely televised sporting event in the world can’t hurt.”^[26] David Abeles of TaylorMade-Adidas, the official apparel provider for USA Golf, enthused, “We think golf returning to the Olympics is a really big deal. . . .It’s a great way to stimulate growth and interest in the sport on a global basis, especially in countries that haven’t had a vehicle to convey the importance of golf to the casual sports fan. As far as introducing the personalities and life stories of the players, there is no showcase in sports like the Olympics.”^[27]

Golf can certainly benefit from the inclusion of the sport in the Olympics. While some argue that the major golf championships, both amateur and professional, have defined the great golfers of the past, and that the “greatest players in history – Bobby Jones, Walter Hagen, Gene Sarazen, Ben Hogan, Sam Snead, Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, Seve Ballesteros, Greg Norman and Nick Faldo – never had a chance to compete in the Olympics”, you also need to look to the future development of the sport.^[28] While the Olympics is not the pinnacle for soccer, tennis or basketball, these sports have benefited greatly from their inclusion in the Games.^[29] Tennis, another individual sport, provides a useful comparison for contemplating golf at the Olympics. Andy Murray’s gold medal at the 2012 London Olympics was as exciting and momentous as winning Wimbledon, particularly because his Olympic win occurred in his home country. Roger Federer carrying the Swiss flag in the opening ceremonies of the 2004 and 2008 Olympic Games were also memorable moments.^[30]

Indeed, golf’s leaders believe that once golf is re-established as an Olympic sport, the players will become more enthusiastic. Said Payne, “My experience has been when looking at the joy and the happiness of kids competing all across the board in various Olympic endeavors, that

there is nothing, nothing, more powerful than representing your country. . . .And so I suspect that you will see that take over and totally capture the enthusiasm of the players for golf. I think what you feel now, and what you hear now, as some of these individuals themselves become part of the Olympics, probably change their mind.”[31] In time, the Olympics could be viewed as on par with the Master competitions for golfers: “Maybe most golfers do not covet an Olympic gold medal the way they do a Masters green jacket or the British Open’s claret jug. But in time their attitudes could change.”[32]

The debate over whether golf is a needed or good inclusion to the Olympics may be a luxury that the players do not have in the future. While golf will be included in 2016 and 2020 in Tokyo, in 2017, the International Olympic Committee will vote on the slate for the 2024 Olympic Games: “It won’t help golf’s chances if the players are viewed as whiny and entitled and unappreciative of the larger meaning of the Olympic spirit.”[33]

The Olympic golf events officially kick off tomorrow. Bubba Watson, Rickie Fowler, Patrick Reed and Matt Kuchar are the U.S. Men’s golf team, and Lexi Thompson, Stacy Lewis and Gerina Pillier are the U.S. Women’s golf team.[34] We wish them the best of luck – go Team U.S.A.!

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[1] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golf_at_the_2016_Summer_Olympics (last visited May 18, 2016).

[2] See *id.* To clarify, the men’s event would be the first since 1904, and the women’s event would be the first time ever as a women’s Olympic event. On October 9, 2009, the 121st International Olympic Committee (“IOC”) Session chose to reintroduce golf to the Olympic Games, citing the “rapid expansion” and “globali[z]ation of the sport.” With this vote, golf officially became an Olympic sport for the 2016 and 2020 Summer Olympic Games.[2] See “Wait until you see who won’t be in the Olympics if qualifying ended today,” Ron Sirak, *golfdigest.com*, January 6, 2016.

[3] In addition, when Olympic organizers invited top players throughout the world to a one-day exhibition in Rio De Janeiro on March 8, 2016, to test the official venue for the 2016 Olympic Games, no elite golfers accepted the invitation. See “This week in Olympic golf: Top players pass on Rio course test run,” Joel Beall, *golfdigest.com*, March 1, 2016.

[4] “Hectic schedule is main reason top golfers are shunning Rio Olympics,” Bob Harig, *espn.com*, April 22, 2016. Qualification will be determined by world rankings as of July 11, 2016, with a total of 60 players qualifying in each of the men’s and women’s events. The top 15 players of each gender will automatically qualify, although there is a cap of 4 golfers per country who can qualify in this manner. The remaining spots then go to the highest-ranked players from countries that do not already have two qualified golfers. The IGF has guaranteed that at least

one golfer from Brazil, as host nation, and each geographical region (Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and Oceania) will qualify.

[5] See *id.*

[6] "Why Aren't More Players Excited About Golf's Olympics Return?," Alan Shipnuck, *golf.com*, May 9, 2016.

[7] See "Rio 2016: Olympics no show is Rory McIlroy's and Jason Day's loss as Justin Rose prepares for lasting memories," Kevin Garside, *independent.uk.com*, August 10, 2016. Prior to passing on participation, however, McIlroy, Day and Spieth were excited proponents for golf's re-inclusion in the Olympic Games.

[8] See Harig.

[9] See *id.*

[10] See *id.*

[11] See *id.*

[12] "Players' opinions differ on golf's return to Olympics," Scott Michaux, *augusta.com*, April 7, 2016.

[13] See *id.* Scott's opinion regarding the importance of the Olympic Games have left him vulnerable to considerable criticism. Jack Nicklaus, the sport's "preeminent elder statesman," remarked that Scott's decision was "sad for the Olympics and sad for the game of golf." See Shipnuck. Australian swimming great Dawn Fraser also criticized Scott, a fellow Australian. Fraser, a gold medalist at the 1956, 1960 and 1964 Olympics, accused Scott of "putting money ahead of national pride." Fraser, age 78, wrote on Facebook, "Very sorry to hear that Adam Scott cannot fit it into his schedule to play for Australia at the Olympics. . . . Well done Adam. . . . great to put your country on hold so that you can fulfill your own schedule. How much money do you want in life? Not showing much for your country. . . . I guess working three jobs a week to secure my place as a[n] Olympic swimmer has given me the strength to say what I feel about sportsmen and women that do this." "Golf's Olympic inclusion questioned after high-profile no shows," Karolos Grohmann, *sports.yahoo.com*, April 22, 2016. Finally, Michael Phelps, the most successful Olympian in history with 25 medals, including 21 golds, commented, "I think it stinks not having [Scott] in there, somebody who has been such a big part of the game over the last few years." Phelps concluded, "You could probably argue that some of these guys probably think the Masters, the rest of the majors, are bigger than what the Olympics is. In reality, the Olympics is the largest level of athletics in the world. There's no higher level of competition." "Golf's Schedule Takes the Sheen Off Olympic Gold," Karen Crouse, *nytimes.com*, May 4, 2016.

[14] See Crouse.

[15] See *Harig*.

[16] See Michaux.

[17] See Crouse.

[18] See Michaux.

[19] See Beall.

[20] See Michaux.

[21] See *id.*

[22] See Shipnuck.

[23] See *id.*

[24] See Grohmann.

[25] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golf_at_the_2016_Summer_Olympics (last visited May 18, 2016).

[26] See Michaux.

[27] See Shipnuck.

[28] See Michaux.

[29] See Shipnuck.

[30] See *id.*

[31] See Michaux.

[32] See Crouse.

[33] See Shipnuck.

[34] See "USA Golf officially names team for Rio Olympics," Bill Leopold, nbcolympics.com, July 18, 2016.

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golf, golfers, grow-the-game initiative, gymnastics, Henrik Stenson, International Olympic Committee, Lexi Thompson, Louis Oosthuizen, majors, Martin Kaymer, Master competitions, Matt Kuchar, Melissa Reid, men's golf, men's individual events, Olympic games, Olympic golf course, Olympic golf events, Olympic spirit, Patrick Reed, PGA, President of the Rio de Janeiro Organizing Committee, Professional Golfers' Association of America, Reserva de Marapendi, Rickie Fowler, Rio de Janeiro, Roger Federer, Sergio Garcia, Stacy Lewis, Summer Olympics, swimming, TaylorMade-Adidas, Team U.S.A., tennis, The Augusta National Golf Club, track and field, U.S. Men's golf team, U.S. Women's golf team, Vijay Singh, women's golf, women's individual events, world-class golfers, wrestling, XXXI Olympiad, Zika virus