

# Olympic Golf Gets a Gold Medal

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August 14, 2016



Well now, that was worth waiting for – all 112 years of it. The fears and frustration following big-name defections melted away Sunday in Rio de Janeiro when Justin Rose of Great Britain birdied the final hole to hold off Sweden's Henrik Stenson and win the first Olympic gold medal since 1904.

The 2013 U.S. Open champion bested the 2016 winner of the Open Championship. Nothing shabby about that. For the record, Matt Kuchar of the United States captured the bronze medal.

Full disclosure, I've been a supporter of Olympic golf from Day One. I think anything that gives golf greater exposure – global exposure – is good for the game. Despite what Rory McIlroy says, all of us who love golf should want to grow the game. And Olympic golf can't hurt.

The intention was never to suggest that Olympic gold is more prized than a Masters green jacket, the silver claret jug of The Open or the trophy of any other men's or women's major championships. The point was not to devalue the majors, but rather to enhance to the game.

Having golf on the largest, most-watched stage in all of sports can only be a good thing.

Despite the absence of many top men in Brazil, the return of golf to the Olympics was an unqualified success. Rose and Stenson, playing together, were tied going to the last hole when the Englishman stiffed his pitch shot to kick-in distance to win it.

An unanticipated addition to the excitement was the battle for the bronze medal. In what other tournament would third place be this compelling? But the guy who finishes fourth leaves Brazil empty handed. That wasn't Kuchar, who closed with a brilliant final round 63.

"I've never been so excited to finish top-three in my life," Kuchar told Golf Channel. "I've never felt this kind of pride bursting out of my chest before."

Sure, there are some things to second-guess about Olympic golf, in terms of format especially, but there is no reason to second-guess the return of golf.

Personally, I'd have rather seen best-ball, match play instead of 72 holes of stroke play. I have two reasons for this. First off, we see 72 holes of stroke play virtually every week

on a multitude of pro tours around the world. Having something different would have been a good thing.

Secondly, best-ball match play would increase the number of top players in the event and bring the national element into the competition. Instead of 60 players each for the men and women we could have had 64 teams for each – 128 players in each competition.

That means players like Rolex Rankings No. 10 Ha Na Jang of South Korea would not be left out because her country had already qualified the maximum four players. You could up the maximum per country to eight.

As for the national element, imagine a best-ball match of Bubba Watson and Rickie Fowler, for example, against the Aussie duo of Adam Scott and Jason Day, both of whom chose to sit out this Olympics. Or Lexi Thompson and Stacy Lewis going against Inbee Park and Sei Young Kim of South Korea.

Now, the men who choose not to go to Rio have come under a lot of criticism but I'm willing to give them all a pass, except McIlroy. I think these defections were Brazil-specific for numerous safety reasons. If this were London in 2012 or Tokyo in 2020 all those big names would be there.

There is really no one to blame for the situation in Brazil except bad luck. It is a very different country now than it was in 2009, when it was awarded the Olympics. The political and economic collapse happened since then and made dealing with the environmental challenges virtually impossible.

As for the Zika virus, no one saw that coming in 2009.

I understand why a lot of really rich male golfers opted to stay home. What I don't understand about McIlroy is why he said he was not even going to watch Olympic golf and that he feels no obligation to grow the game.

I believe in not only the physical glory of the game but also the values it teaches. Golf is about discipline, hard work, honesty, focus, respect for your opponent and a host of other positive attributes that this current presidential campaign makes you appreciate all the more.

Growing golf is not only good for golf, it is good for the people who play golf.

When people ask me why the women did not defect from the Olympics in anywhere near the numbers as the men – especially since Zika is more of a threat to women of child-bearing age – my answer is this:

The women's game does not get the same exposure as the men. Honestly, they are not as spoiled by money and attention as the men. This is a chance for them to perform on a global stage and they relish the opportunity.

On Wednesday, 60 players bring the women's game back to the Olympic for the first time since 1900, when Margaret Abbott out-performed nine other women to win in Paris. For the record, she shot 47 in the nine-hole event and was the first American woman ever to win Olympic gold.

And on Wednesday, the top-nine in the Rolex Rankings will tee off – Lydia Ko of New Zealand; Ariya Jutanugarn of Thailand; Brooke Henderson of Canada; Inbee Park, Sei Young Kim, Amy Yang and In Gee Chun of South Korea; Lexi Thompson and Stacy Lewis of the United States.

The chances are very good that the woman who stands on the podium Saturday afternoon with gold around her neck will be one of the best players in women's golf. And the chances are good that when all is said and done, the return of golf to the Olympics will be deemed to be a smashing success. It already feels that way.

Next year, the International Olympic Committee vote on whether to expand golf beyond the 2020 Games. I'm guessing they will. I think the male defections this year will be seen as Brazil-specific bad luck. And I think the IOC will like the quality of sponsors and viewers golf brings to the Games.

Golf is back in the Olympics. We should all be happy about that. I'll weigh in again after the women's event.