

MONDAY MULLIGAN: POY, RYDER CUP, TIGER AND ARNOLD

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Post-Labor Day is a fun time of the year. Football is amping up, baseball turns hot with pennant races and this year we have a U.S. Presidential contest to boot. In golf, the PGA Tour Player of the Year race is over in my mind, but the LPGA POY remains intense. At the same time, the Ryder Cup looms – as does Tiger – and Arnold Palmer remains the once and future King.

Maybe it was becoming a father in 2015 or perhaps the six-month “break” in 2014 to seek help for “personal challenges,” but 32-year-old Dustin Johnson has woken up, smelled the coffee and is now living up to his enormous talent. With his victory Sunday at the BMW Championship, the third of the FedEx Cup Playoff events, DJ has pretty much wrapped up POY. He has three wins, along with Jason Day, but DJ has a major – the U.S. Open – the WGC-Bridgestone Invitational and the BMW. Not too shabby.

Add to that the fact he leads the tour in scoring average and top-10 finishes with 14 and DJ has the clear nod over Day, who has three wins, and Adam Scott and Jordan Spieth, who have two each. I’m thinking it doesn’t matter who wins the Tour Championship or the FedEx Cup, DJ has my POY vote. Four of his 14 PGA Tour wins have come since Johnson’s hiatus and this is truly his breakout year. Let’s hope he keeps building on this.

A TWO-WOMAN RACE

Heading into the fifth and final major of the year – this week’s Evian Championship in France – the battle for LPGA Player of the Year is between Ariya Jutanugarn, who has five wins including a major, and Lydia Ko, who has four titles including a major. Unlike the men’s side, this is a race very much alive. For one thing, there is more of the season left.

Remember, on the PGA Tour, 2017 starts in 2016. So the Tour Championship is all there is. The LPGA has a major at Evian, seven tournaments outside the United States and then the season-ending CME Group Tour Championship in Naples, Fla. There is a lot of golf left to play.

With majors divided among Jutanugarn, Ko, Brooke Henderson and Brittany Lang, it seems like either Ariya or Lydia will be POY, unless someone rips off an unbelievable winning streak. It says something about the healthy state of women's golf – and its clearly robust future – when the two fighting it out for top honors are 19 and 20 years old. Good stuff.

A LITTLE RYDER CUP LOVE

Tiger Woods won't be playing the Ryder Cup, but he will be at the Hazeltine on Sept. 30-Oct. 2 as one of the vice captains for Davis Love III. Also there will be Rickie Fowler, J.B. Holmes and Matt Kuchar, who were selected Sept. 12 by Love as three of his four wild card selections. The final pick will be made after the Tour Championship and I'm thinking Bubba Watson is that guy.

Qualifying for the team off points were Dustin Johnson, Jordan Spieth, Phil Mickelson, Patrick Reed, Jimmy Walker, Brooks Koepka, Brandt Snedeker and Zach Johnson.

What fascinates me about the Ryder Cup is that Europe always manages to come into the event talking like it's the woe-is-me underdog, despite the fact that since 1985 its record is 10-4-1, including the last three. The Euros play that head game extremely well, always managing to put the expectation pressure on the Yanks.

File this thought away for future reference: The decision by the NCAA to play the college team finals as match play will translate into Ryder Cup wins for the United States down the road. Europeans are much more used to match play. Now the young Americans will get that experience. Great move by the NCAA. And it makes for great TV.

YEAR OF THE TIGER

So after more than a year on the shelf, Tiger Woods says he's coming back, hopefully at the Safeway Open Oct. 13-16 at the Silverado Resort and Spa in Napa, Calif. He says he also hopes to play in Turkey in November and in his Hero World Challenge in December.

"My rehabilitation is to the point where I'm comfortable making plans, but I still have work to do," Tiger said on his website. "Whether I can play depends on my continued progress and recovery. My hope is to have my game ready to go."

What can we expect? There is absolutely no way of knowing. When it comes to injuries and the state of practice, the Woods camp makes Bill Belichick and the New England Patriots look like they are performing under Sunshine Laws of full disclosure.

One thing we know for sure is this: Whatever Tiger does is news. His demise was as compelling as his rise and his return should give a jolt to what as been a sluggish year for golf TV ratings.

THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING

In the 1950s, as working people in post-World War II America were discovering leisure time and TV was realizing the power of broadcasting live sports, the free-swinging son of a golf course superintendent came out of Western Pennsylvania to capture the hearts of the nation, and eventually the world.

You can argue who the greatest golfer of all-time was and several players would be in the conversation, but if the discussion is about the most important player of all-time there is one answer: Arnold Palmer. He took the game out of the country club and brought it to the masses. He was and remains the single greatest grow-the-game program golf has ever known.

On Sept. 10, Arnold turned 87 years old. Happy Birthday, Arnie! Thank you for what you have meant for the game so many of us love so much!

DIVOTS AND PITCH MARKS

The 2018 Ricoh Women's British Open will return to Royal Lytham & St. Annes in England. I was there in 2003 when Annika Sorenstam completed the career Grand Slam; in 2006 when Sherri Steinhauer won and again in 2009 when Catriona Matthew won just 11 weeks after giving birth. Awesome venue, one of my all-time favorites... Bryson DeChambeau, he of the Kangol hats and 37-inch shafts in all his irons, won a four-man playoff at the Web.com Tour DAP Championship in Cleveland to lock up a PGA Tour card for the 2016-17 season... Joost Luiten of the Netherlands won the KLM Open on the European Tour.

That's it for now. See you next week.