

ONE PERSON'S VIEW OF THE TOP-10 STORIES IN GOLF IN 2016

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From the home office in Wellfleet, Mass., and after careful consideration by an esteemed panel of experts – me – with the votes scrupulously tabulated by Julian Assange, Wikileaks and Vladimir Putin, here is the RonSirak.com Top-10 List of stories in golf for 2016. Drumroll please...

No. 10 – Grow the Game: Efforts by Augusta National GC with governing bodies to bring new players and audiences to golf started to bear fruit. By the end of 2016, Hideki Matsuyama of Japan, winner of the Asia-Pacific Amateur Championship in 2010 and '11, was emerging as a top player, spurring hopes the Latin America Amateur Championship, which like the Asia-Pacific gives a Masters invite to the winner, and the Drive, Chip & Putt Championship, the finals of which are held at ANGC, will have a similar impact on the game.

No. 9 – Tiger Returns: After an absence of 16 months in which he fell to No. 898 in the OWGR, Woods re-emerged at the Hero World Challenge in December. Good news: 65 on Friday. Bad news: 76 on Sunday. Great news: he didn't limp, grimace or withdraw. Wounded Tiger, Hidden Agenda. Oh, and the TV ratings for Saturday – the day after that 65 – were off the charts. Welcome back, Tiger.

No. 8 – NCAA Championships: The switch of D1 NCAA team championship to match play is a hit. This was the second year for the women and Washington brought home the title while Oregon grabbed the crown for the men, who switched to match play in 2009. Team match play is highly entertaining, playing the men's and women's championship back-to-back on the same venue is a great idea and Golf Channel showing the mid-week event gave much-needed exposure to the amateur game.

No. 7 – U.S. Women’s Open: Anna Nordqvist won’t be remembered as the Roberto De Vincenzo of women’s golf, but her playoff loss to Brittany Lang at CordeValle GC was helped by a two-stroke penalty for grounding her club in a bunker on the second of three extra holes. Lang, 30, became the first player that old to win the Women’s Open since Annika Sorenstam, 35, in 2006. And an early favorite for 2017 LPGA Rolex Rookie of the Year emerged: Sung Hyun Park, 23, of South Korea. She needed a birdie on the par-5 finishing hole to make the playoff but bogeyed to finish third. Park kills it, averaging more than 270 yards off the tee.

No. 6 – U.S. Open: Dustin Johnson got the title he gave away a year earlier at Chambers Bay, prevailing at Oakmont despite a one-stroke after-the-fact penalty that went from No to Maybe to Yes in the space of 13 holes. Sarazen, Jones, Hogan, Snead, and Nicklaus are among those who’ve won at the brilliant Pennsylvania layout, but no one ever drove the ball the way Johnson did this year. His tee shot on No. 1 Sunday traveled 378 yards. At 32, Johnson seems to be finding his focus.

No. 5 – USGA Rebounds: The governing body bounced back from a rocky PR year marred by penalties and communications mishaps to eliminate the penalty for accidentally causing your ball to move and by securing iconic venues Seminole and Cypress Point for upcoming Walker Cups. That’s like finishing birdie, birdie, birdie.

No. 4 – The Kids are All Right: The depth and breath of talent in women’s golf is simply staggering. The five LPGA majors were won by Lydia Ko (18, New Zealand), Brooke Henderson (18, Canada), Ariya Jutanugarn (20, Thailand), In Gee Chun (22, South Korea) and Lang (30, United States). The nine multiple winners on tour in 2016 came from eight countries with an average age of 22.3. At the other end of the spectrum, a Senior LPGA Championship was added for 2017 for players 45 and over. Gee, Annika is 46. I wonder if her calendar is open July 10-12? I’d go.

No. 3 – The Duel at Troon: Simply the best Sunday at a major since Tom Watson laid a 65 on Jack Nicklaus’ 66 at Turnberry in 1977 to win by one stroke. Tied with Phil Mickelson, Henrik Stenson birdied Nos. 14, 15, 16 and 18 to finish a record 20 under par, three strokes ahead of Lefty. It was the

first major for a Swedish male, the 11th runner-up finish in a major by Mickelson, second to the 19 by Nicklaus, and some of the best TV in all of sports in 2016

No.2 – Olympic Golf: The return of golf was an unqualified success with the six medal winners coming from six different nations. Justin Rose of England got men's gold and Stenson the silver but watching American Matt Kuchar grind for the bronze made you realize there is no other tournament in which finishing third means so much. Inbee Park of South Korea battled injuries all year just to get to Rio and then won women's gold in a truly inspiring effort. Ko got the silver and Shanshan Feng of China the bronze. I'm guessing when the International Olympic Committee votes in 2017 on whether to extend golf beyond the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo it wins easily.

No. 1 – Death of Arnold Palmer: More than the 62 PGA Tour wins, the seven major championships, the fact he and Mark McCormack invented modern sports marketing by creating International Management Group (IMG) and resurrected the British Open while growing the game globally – Palmer designed the first modern course in China – Arnold will be remembered as a good man who never lost touch with his humble roots as the son of a golf course superintendent. For those who lived in the Palmer Era, which extended 60 of his 87 years, the memory of Palmer will always be as clear as the way he signed his autograph, each detail recognizable and unforgettable. There have been greater golfers, but never anyone as important – and as giving – to the game as Arnie. He was and always will be The King.