

Europe Overcomes Hostile Crowds to Hold Off USA in the Ryder Cup

By Ron Sirak

Bethpage Black turned out to be a home course disadvantage for the Americans in this Ryder Cup. From a set-up that took the teeth out of the brutish layout on New York's Long Island to how the large, loud, abusive galleries motivated Team Europe to play unbelievable golf as it held off Team USA 15-13, the American side squandered the advantage of a home game. This was a competition not nearly as close as the final score.

Europe won the first alternate-shot session 3-1; the opening better-ball contest 2½-1 ½; the Saturday alternate-shot 3-1 and the fourth session, again better-ball, 3-1 to take a virtually insurmountable 11 ½-4 ½ lead into Sunday singles. Team USA needed to win 10 of the 12 singles matches to capture the Cup. That they managed to win six and tie five was a heroic effort that fell just short of a historic comeback.

The point that kept the Ryder Cup in Europe was secured by Shane Lowry, who spent much of the Saturday four-ball session trying to protect his partner, Rory McIlroy, from brutal abuse by American fans.

Since 1985, Europe has won the Ryder Cup 13 times while the United States has taken six and the 1989 match ended in a tie. The weird thing is that no matter how many times Europe wins the Ryder Cup, it always seems to come into the next Cup as the underdog. And they play with that very healthy chip on their shoulder extremely well. The atmosphere at Bethpage fueled that we-don't-get-no-respect attitude in Team Europe. They answered the abuse with some remarkable golf.

First things first: The course set up. With benign rough that encouraged bomb-and-gouge golf, this became a contest in which players who best controlled the spin on their wedges and putted well thrived. That was Team Europe. Tommy Fleetwood, Justin Rose, John Rahm, Lowry and others on this deep, talented squad knocked down flags and rolled in putts, especially the first two days. Meanwhile, America's biggest names – Scottie Scheffler, Bryson DeChambeau and Russell Henley – were a non-factor as Europe built its massive lead.

As frequently happens in golf, nature also played a significant role in the competitive conditions. Mid-week rain softened Bethpage, making the wide fairways play even wider and turned the greens into receptive dartboards. The generous course set-up was made even more forgiving by the softness of the course and coupled with the fact players had the golf ball in their hand because of the wet conditions, Bethpage was defenseless.

As captain, Luke Donald had a great week. He paired his players brilliantly and hid his only rookie – Rasmus Hojgaard – who played only once in the first four sessions. It was a stroke of genius by Team Europe to bring back Donald, who captained Europe to victory in 2023, to head the squad again. Having an experienced captain in an always-volatile road match removed one important variable in the complicated equation that leads to victory.

Nowhere in the 98-year history of this event was that experience as crucial as it was this year. While Ryder Cups always get rowdy, especially since 1985 when Europe started winning regularly, it's usually cheers for the home side and not jeers for the visitors. At Bethpage, the crowd crossed the ethical line of behavior that has long differentiated golf from other sports. This, after all, is the game in which players call penalties on their self.

Donald prepared his team for the expected atmosphere at Bethpage by having his guys practice wearing headphones that channeled crowd noises in their ears, though it is doubtful they heard anything in those headphones as crude as what the crowds yelled at Bethpage, especially the first two days when the American side was unraveling.

The main target of the abuse was Rory McIlroy, which was odd because the Northern Ireland native has embraced America as his new homeland, is a huge fan favorite week after week on the PGA Tour and was the most vocal defender of the Tour against the raid of its players by LIV Golf.

The scenes at Bethpage strayed far from golf's usual atmosphere. In addition to vulgar chants, the rowdy crowd frequently refused to quiet down when European players – especially McIlroy – entered into their pre-shot routine. In Saturday's four-ball session, McIlroy twice backed off a putt on the front nine because the crowd wouldn't get quiet. Soon after, 20 uniformed New York State Troopers showed up and stood with their backs to the players, facing the crowd, trying to intimidate them into civil behavior.

At one point, a beer was thrown at McIlroy's wife. Heather McMahan, an actor/comedian entertaining the crowd on the first tee, led a chant of "f--- you, Rory," later apologizing. Some fans tried to distract European players by squeaking rubber ducks that came with a cocktail being sold on the course. None of that is acceptable behavior.

At times, it clearly got to McIlroy. Once when he had to back off a tee shot he then drove wildly into the rough. On another occasion, he pointed at spectators and yelled "f--- you!" When the competition was over, McIlroy led his teammates in a social media video in which they chanted "Are you watching Donald Trump?"

The Ryder Cup has become one of the biggest events in sports. The challenge is to not let that growth create a hostile atmosphere. The 2027 Ryder Cup will be at Adare Manor in Ireland. Perhaps American fans will learn a thing or two about how to behave.

In Europe, fans cheer the good shots of their players and jeer the Americans with clever songs and cheeky chants. But they always settle down when it is time for a player to execute a shot. Let's hope that what happened at Bethpage doesn't change the atmosphere in Ireland in 2027.

Ultimately, Team Europe handled the ugly atmosphere in the most beautiful way – they played exquisite golf. Team Americans lost the Ryder Cup at Bethpage Black but they can win it back in 2027 or 2029. The American fans lost something it will take much longer to recover – the respect of the rest of the world.