

José María Olazábal

Savouring the prospects of a Ryder Cup defence

/// By Paul Prendergast

European Ryder Cup captain José María Olazábal has kick-started the year in style – kicking off his own season with a strong showing in South Africa and revealing that he would announce his two Captain's picks on the Monday following the Johnnie Walker Championship at Gleneagles.

Olazábal will announce his two picks on August 27 at The Gleneagles Hotel, Perthshire, Scotland, to complete the 12-man European Ryder Cup team who will travel to Medinah Country Club, Chicago, Illinois, USA, to defend the trophy against the United States from September 28-30. This will avoid the delicate situation that occurred in 2010, when captain Colin Montgomery had to make captain's picks while players had yet to complete their tournament in the United States.

'We have made the decision regarding that, and the announcement is going to be the Monday following Gleneagles. So we are going to wait until whatever happens in the States before we make the decision,' he said.

'Looking at it when it happened (in 2010), it was not a comfortable situation for anybody. Anyone playing in the States, who might be on the verge of winning and changing his chances of being in the team - it would be completely unfair to name those two picks before the guy even tees off.'

This common sense decision will be popular amongst players and a reason why Olazabal's captaincy is likely to be a success. Olazabal was voted unanimously by the players for the role, which means a lot to him.

And while Olazabal is still active on Tour and a veteran of 7 Ryder Cup campaigns as a player, the Hall of Famer will not be tempted into trying to make a late run at making the team as a player but on that front, he has taken positive steps forward on the 'comeback' trail from his long term bouts with severe rheumatism and tendinitis.

Olazabal recently shot 8 under to finish 6th at the Volvo Golf Champions event at Fancourt in South Africa, in a limited field event that included reigning Masters champion Charl Schwartzel, reigning Open Champion Darren Clarke and luminaries such as Ernie Els, Retief Goosen, Louis Oosthuizen, Thomas Bjorn, Miquel Angel Jimenez – in fact, the entire field



was ranked higher than him in the Official World Golf Rankings.

Olazabal was able to answer a few questions from the Abu Dhabi HSBC Golf Championship in late January, as he was preparing to keep the momentum he had established in South Africa going.

Q. Thank you for your time. First and foremost, how is your health?

JOSE MARIA OLAZABAL: My health is improving. Obviously still have a few aches here and there but overall I felt some improvement since Hong Kong last year.

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I’ve been able to practice a little bit more, my game and, you know, exercise a little bit. I cannot still lift weights and things like that, but I have been able to run a little bit and do things that I haven’t been able to do for three years now.

Q. Have you been able to practice and prepare as you would like?

JMO: Obviously I’m used to practicing more but I’ve been able to work a little bit on my game, yes.

Not so much on my short game, because obviously in wintertime, the golf courses are pretty wet and the greens are slow. But I’ve been able to hit balls almost every day and that was a good sign.

Q. It must have been extremely encouraging to start the year off playing so well in South Africa, against such a quality field on a quality golf course.

JMO: Yes, it was encouraging, and it’s something that a player needs to see in order to get a little bit of the confidence back and belief.

It’s true that it was a short field, but as you said, it was a strong field and a tough golf course. So that made every shot, every round even better.

Q. Does last week change your outlook for the year in terms of how often you’ll play, or is your schedule purely driven by The Ryder Cup, by your health?



JMO: By the health mainly. My schedule is going to be based by my health and The Ryder Cup. Not so much by my scoring. Obviously I’m going to try to play as much as I can.

As I said last year, I’m going to try to be close to the players so that they see me, if they need to talk to me or they feel like talking to me or asking any questions or whatever, so I can be there for them. That’s the idea.

But the schedule is going to be based between those two things, health and Ryder Cup.

Q. Does a result like that alter your expectations regarding winning on Tour again, or have you always maintained that fire in your belly?

JMO: I’ve always maintained that fire in the belly, but the result itself, it doesn’t change anything, because I’m more concerned on the journey that I have to do to get there, to get to the winning circle again.

I don’t know how long the journey is going to be, but I know it’s a journey that has just started. So I’m going to keep on working hard on my game, if I can, and try to improve certain areas of my game that I know I need to improve.

I can do it on the driving range, but it’s harder for me to take it on to the golf course and that’s what I have to do.

Q. Perhaps the 2010 Ryder Cup assistant’s magic will rub off on you, Björn, Clarke and Garcia in 2011.

JMO: Well, hopefully so! We’ll see. Those guys are playing well. Darren won The Open last year, Thomas won two tournaments in a row, won three tournaments during the season.

Sergio got his game back winning two tournaments in a row in Spain. He seems to be in a better frame of mind on the golf course, which is I think very important. I think that’s the only thing important in his case, because from tee to green, he’s a great

player, and as soon as that ball drops in the hole quick enough, the results are going to be there.

But it’s not just them. There are a lot of guys that are doing their homework. You know, Rory, Luke, Lee, Martin Kaymer. There is a bunch of players that are doing well.

It’s early days, but hopefully as you said, the magic that was there at Celtic Manor will follow me in 2012.

Q. It’s too early to tell what the team will look like, but with Luke, Rory, Lee and Martin at the top of the Official World Golf Rankings, it’s a formidable lineup already.

JMO: I think European golf is going through a golden stage in its history. It’s similar to the late 80s, early 90s when we had Seve and Woosie, Nick, Bernhard, Sandy, the Big Five.

Q. And yourself.

JMO: In a little way, yeah. I think we are going through a very sweet moment.

It’s true that for The Ryder Cup, it will be important to have those players, but what comes that week is that those players play their game and play well enough because that week is the one that counts for me if you like as Ryder Cup captain!

Q. You’re a veteran of The Ryder Cup as a player but sitting in the captain’s chair, can you tell us how the responsibilities impact on you this far out?

JMO: Well, this far out, you know you have to be careful on what you say, what you do. There is a lot of media attention on whatever you do.

For instance, when we went to Chicago last September for the “Year Out” function, the media attention was huge there. You had things to do: Hit a shot from the 16th floor of Trump Tower which was very windy, and actually I think Davis and myself were under a lot of pressure from the fire department chief! But, you know, up to

now, the responsibility has been mainly except that week - off the course doing meetings, making decisions regarding clothing and golf bags and attire and things like that.

But I think as the day gets closer, obviously that attention will change from being outside the golf course to the golf course.

Q. Sergio seems to love Medinah (Garcia was 2nd in the 1999 PGA Championship - hitting that famous 6 iron from against an oak tree in the final round and running up the fairway to follow the progress of the shot - and T3 at the 2006 PGA). Luke has played well there too. So it’s a venue with some good vibes for you and for your key players?

JMO: Well, there are 12 players on the team. Obviously Luke is a local. He lives next door. He knows the course well. Sergio, as you said, feels comfortable on that golf course. But it’s 12 players, so

everybody has to win points.

This is a team event. It's true that on Sunday we play 12 singles matches. It's an important day. But everyone has to contribute during that week.

Q. You wouldn't want to put any pressure on some players at the start of their season regarding their need to lift their game and so forth, but how is the buzz amongst the players now that the event is only eight months away?

JMO: Well, I think I'm saying this from my own experience. I'm pretty sure that The Ryder Cup is in the back of their minds every week. I know they are going to try hard to be in that team, because they love playing The Ryder Cup. I have no doubts about that.

All of them want to be in that team, and from that point of view, I know they are going to be really trying hard. So that is not a concern to me. And I know they are going to be really working their backsides off to make that team.

Q. Comparing their stocks midway through 2011 to now, the outlook for the U.S. Team has certainly skyrocketed with the arrival of Keegan Bradley, Webb Simpson, the maturing of Bubba Watson and the veterans gelling well with the youngsters.

JMO: Well, I kept an eye on The Presidents Cup in Australia. I think they did a good job, and I know Freddie, he's a good friend of Davis, so I'm pretty sure there will be some information going from one end to the other.

And it's true that the U.S. Team is getting stronger in the sense that there are a lot of young kids that are doing great things. But it's been like that in the U.S. Team every year. I mean, they have always been very, very strong, and I don't think this is going to be an exception to that.

Q. Of course, it would seem one 'T. Woods' has his mojo back. It will be interesting to see how he performs in the early months of the year after such a good finish in 2011.

JMO: Well, he finished well. I think I've always said, even though, you know, his troubles for different reasons the last couple of years, and always believed that he still has the desire to be a force in this game and to beat Jack's record.

And I don't have any doubts that he's going to be in that team, and he's going to be a strong asset to the U.S. Team.



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