

Where Magic Can Happen

After some minor tweaking by the USGA, the venerable Lake Course at San Francisco's Olympic Club appears primed to host yet another classic US Open

To borrow the words of former United States Golf Association Executive Director Frank Hannigan, something magical always seems to happen at Olympic.

From June 14-17, the strictly private Olympic Club in San Mateo County just south of the City of San Francisco will host the national championship of the United States for the fifth time over its Lake Course – 14 years since the last Open staged there in 1998.

The US Open's four previous ventures to Olympic have certainly been memorable. But perhaps more tellingly they have also seen a handful of the game's legends endure some of the most heartbreaking defeats ever on the major championship stage.

Olympic hurdle: after an unusually receptive test at Congressional last year, the US Open returns to the challenging Olympic Club's East Course, here at the 8th hole



San Francisco stalwart: the luxurious clubhouse at Olympic Club (top); the course's glorious 7th hole

There was the seemingly impossible victory by Billy Casper in 1966, where he defeated Arnold Palmer in a play-off after the King held a seven-shot lead with only nine holes to play. And then there was the classic 'David and Goliath' story of unheralded club professional Jack Fleck who caught and then beat the genius that was Ben Hogan in an 18-hole play-off in 1955. These stories have been recounted so many times that the stories have been etched into folklore.

In a similar vein, Tom Watson – already an eight-time Major winner – was thwarted over the final holes for a second US Open crown at Olympic in 1987 by journeyman Scott Simpson. Watson's fellow luminary Seve Ballesteros finished close behind in a tie for third.

Current USGA Executive Director Mike Davis echoed his predecessor's thoughts about the US Open's return to California for a third time in the past five years.

"I know I love coming to coastal California, there is something magical about it. First of all, in June it's great weather but coming to San Francisco is great. To travel (here) to the US Open, whether it's domestic or international,

people love coming to this city; the hotels, restaurants, it's just great to be here," said the highly regarded Davis said.

The Olympic Club, which offers plenty more than just golf and whose total membership currently exceeds 5,000, has seen a number of course changes since opening for play in 1919 with a design by Sam Whiting. Prior to hosting its first Open in 1955, Robert Trent Jones Sr was hired to work on the course over a two-year period and in preparation for the 2012 Open, some substantial alterations have been carried out by course architect Bill Love, in close association with the USGA. Mike Davis, perhaps not surprisingly, thinks Love has done a marvelous job. "I've yet to hear anybody that's even remotely neutral on his work," said Davis.

The USGA will set up the course to play to 7,154 yards for the Open to a par of 70, which is approximately 357 yards longer than the 1998 championship when Lee Janzen overcame a faltering Payne Stewart by a single shot.

Davis notes that playing an Open at under 7,200 yards is short by modern day standards but points out that the course won't 'play' short.

"We're at sea level here, and with the cold,

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moist air that you've got, the ball just doesn't go as far. So I think that is a very deceiving yardage and a yardage that I don't think, in fact, I know we'll not be playing that full yardage on any given day," said Davis.

The golf course itself will also play differently to most other US Open venues and is regarded by the USGA supremo as one of the best shot making venues on the rota.

A feature unique of Olympic, Davis pointed out, is that at least four holes have a dogleg going in one direction but the cant of the fairway goes in the other, citing the 4th, 5th, 9th and 17th holes as examples. "In those cases, you really do need to be able to work your golf ball. It's something you don't see on tour much anymore, guys purposely trying to work it one way or actually both ways," said Davis.

"I think here when you get firm conditions, and we are almost guaranteed we will have firm conditions here in June, if you're trying to play a left to right shot on the 4th hole, it's never going to work. Or if you're trying to play a left right shot on the 5th hole, it's not going to work, and I can keep going on and on. So I think being able to maneuver your ball is really a great advantage for this Open," Davis continued. "We can get it firm enough where the players have to think about what happens when the ball lands, and that is not just on the greens, but on the fairways and when you miss a green. So it certainly adds an element and dimension that makes it tougher."

The Olympic Club's close proximity to the coast also guarantees that a degree of wind will play a role in the Open. The fact that the course



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is heavily tree-lined makes life tougher still; stand on the foliage-enclosed tee boxes and you'll have a tough time gauging the breeze, if you can feel it at all. But it's almost certainly there.

The notoriously slick greens will be a much anticipated prospect for spectators and a worldwide viewing audience, who in the main appreciate the chance to see the world's best tested more than they might be used to at a regular tour event. The challenge this year of a USGA setup of 'firm and fast' putting surfaces will be exacerbated by the natural slopes and undulations of the fairways and green complexes at Olympic, where razor sharp short game skills and patience will be absolute pre-requisites for success.

The USGA plan to have the greens running at between 11.5 to 12.5 on the Stimpmeter, which they feel is optimum. They will also shave some of the green surrounds on more holes than players will be used to at other US Open venues

to bring more short game options into play.

Other changes to the course setup or the design changes made by Love include a change to the par for the 1st and 17th holes (turning these short par fives into long par fours), a new 8th hole and a new tee on the par-five 16th – allowing the USGA to set the tees back to play at an astonishing 670 yards on some days of the championship.

"The first six holes are going to just be brutal. I would contend if you play the first six holes in two over, I don't think you're giving up anything to the field," said Davis. "However on the back nine, we potentially could see a US Open where the last five holes are finished with somebody hitting a wedge on every hole. That may not happen on 17, because they may go for it in two so they're not really hitting a wedge approach, but if you think about this US Open, it's unique.

"You've got a new tee at 16, the par five, the big dogleg that we're going to play on Sunday at 670 yards. The reason we did that is we really felt that that would make it a true 'three shotter'. The wonderful thing about that hole is that from the back, if you miss any one of your shots, it's awful hard to catch up. We won't play it back there every day but it will certainly play like it did, I think in my opinion, when Hogan and Palmer played it back in 1955 and '66. It will be

Tantalizing trio (clockwise from opposite): the front nine presents no easy start, here at the 3rd, 9th and 2nd holes





Fitting finale: the 18th (top) – an exciting home hole – will ensure drama a plenty come Sunday; Rory McIlroy poses with the US Open trophy after romping to victory at Congressional last year

a big, big par-five for them.”

Rory’s McIlroy’s record breaking win at an unusually placid Congressional last year has not been a primary catalyst for any change in thinking by the USGA in their plans for the golf course, although it’s safe to assume that the reigning Hong Kong Open champion’s historic scoring will not come anywhere close to being bettered at Olympic. “One hundred and eleven US Opens have been played and he [McIlroy] not only broke the record, but he broke it by a good bit,” Davis pointed out.

But how does the USGA feel about that?

“We have a great, great champion in Rory McIlroy,” said Davis. “I don’t care what the conditions were, Rory would have lapped the field whether it was firm and fast or soft the way it ended up being all four rounds at Congressional. So I think we were very, very pleased about Rory as our champion but I think the one aspect we weren’t overly happy with was it was so soft. No blame directed at Congressional, we just got rain every single night ... that’s how much Mother Nature can affect things.”

If the rain stays away, Olympic should provide another classic US Open test. But with its track record of creating heroes out of underdogs, don’t be surprised by anything. Spencer Levin to beat Phil Mickelson in a play-off, anyone?



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