



# Which 'Underdog' could win at Olympic?



Some of the holes at Olympic (top left to bottom right next page) 2nd, 3rd, 7th, 9th, 17th and 18th. (Main next page) 8th



//// By Paul Prendergast

The Olympic Club's penchant for throwing up 'underdog' champions in the four previous US Opens staged over the tree lined undulating Lake Course has been bewildering but when examined closely, hardly surprising at all.

History suggests that the victories of Jack Fleck, Billy Casper (with 51 PGA Tour titles to his name, Casper was hardly a surprise packet it must be said), Scott Simpson and Lee Janzen, each achieved by conquering more celebrated names in Ben Hogan, Arnold Palmer, Tom Watson and Payne Stewart, should strongly indicate to us that another bolter might be in line to lift the US Open trophy this June.

What sets Olympic apart from other US Open venues that enable it to throw up results like this, with all due respect to each of the winners of those championships? It certainly hasn't

been length, the golf course played less than 100 yards longer in fourth US Open played in 1998 than it did when Fleck won in the first back in 1955.

For the 2012 Open, the course will break through the 7000 yard barrier for the first time to play at around 7,173 yards to a par of 70. It will also feature the longest par five in US Open history, when the United States Golf Association sets the tees back on the 16th hole to play at 670 yards!

Olympic's challenge over the years has been more about the variety of course conditions, setup and the subtle influence of Mother Nature in the San Francisco Bay Area. The heavily tree lined layout features multiple doglegs, uneven stances in the narrow fairways, slick, undulating greens, buffeting winds that play havoc with club selection through the trees and the potential for Bay Area fog to play a part during the championship.

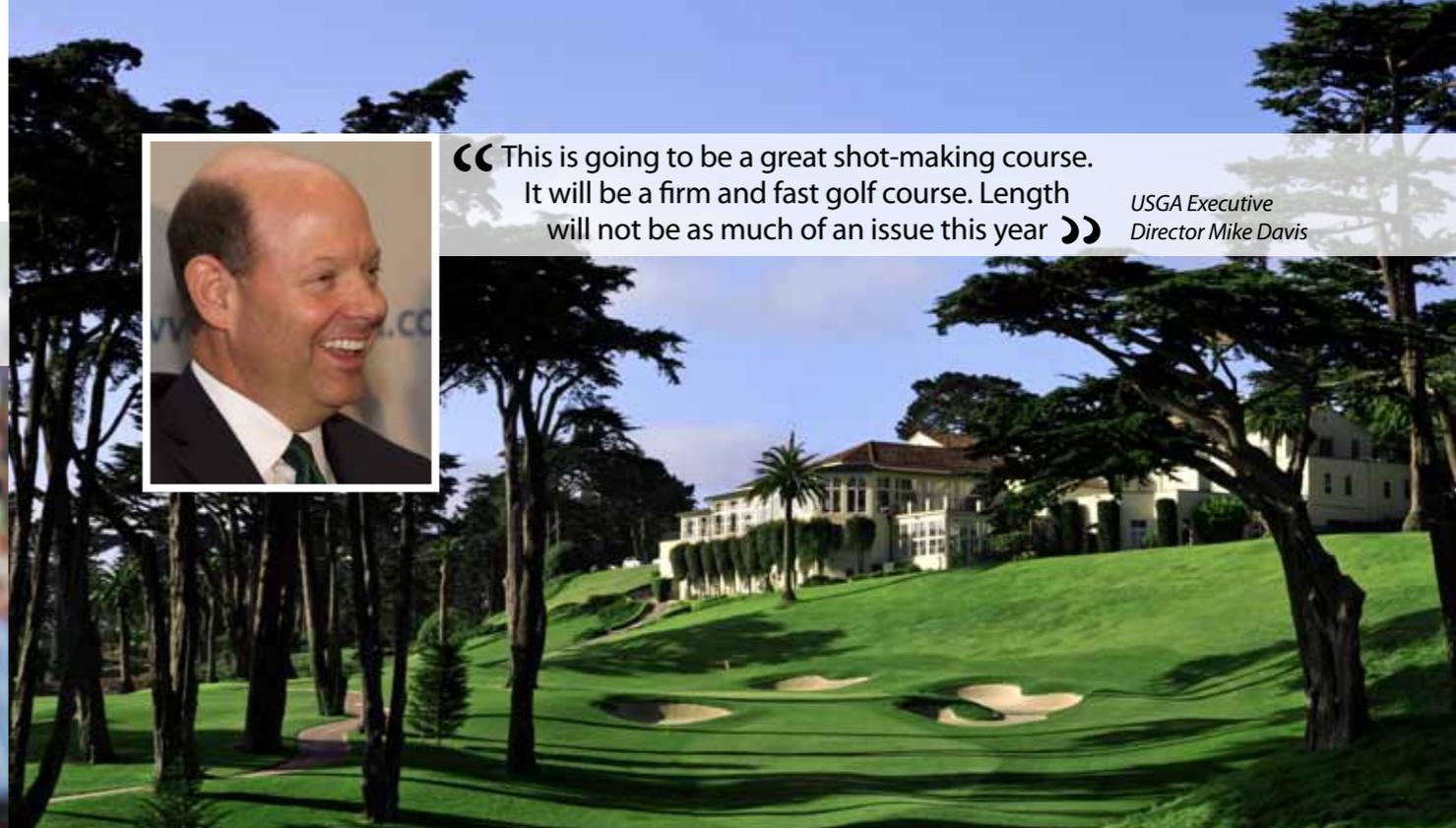
This tantalising 'pot-pourri' has allowed multiple players into the equation in the past and with the USGA forecasting dry conditions for championship, a repeat of last year's record breaking 16 under par score by Rory McIlroy (pictured) is extremely unlikely. "This is going to be a great shot-making course." USGA Executive Director Mike Davis said in early May. "It will be a firm and fast golf course. Length will not be as much of an issue this year."

With the last US Open at Olympic a distant 14 years ago, this year's Open field will not have much, if any, local knowledge to fall back on. Of the top 10 finishers in 1998, only Matt Kuchar is either still playing on Tour, in the field or considered any chance this year of contending. Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson, Steve Stricker, Lee Westwood and others of their ilk in this year's field will also be straining the memory to recall their experiences



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from contesting the '98 championship.

A host of players from the 2007 US Amateur Championship held at Olympic, including Dustin Johnson, Webb Simpson, Rickie Fowler, Kyle Stanley and eventual winner Colt Knost, will have clearer recollections of Olympic but apart from Knost, most either failed to qualify for the matchplay section or were first round losers. Hardly awe inspiring credentials or good vibes to take into the championship this year.

The golf course has also undergone significant changes since 2007, including a new 8th hole and a replacement of the surfaces on the greens, so essentially, it will be a 'new' golf course for everyone.

So while it's standard to ponder in pre-Major deliberations who might win from among the perennial favourites of the day – and given the exacting nature of the layout, I favour Luke Donald

to finally break his 'duck' in Majors - the tradition of US Opens at Olympic suggests we should look to who a likely 'underdog' winner might be this year.

Looking at the games of the past two winners at Olympic, Scott Simpson and Lee Janzen, firm and fast conditions allow opportunities for shorter, straight hitters like them to thrive if their short games are in tune. Not that there are many truly 'short' hitters these days but the Tour's Driving Accuracy statistics this year throw up the names of past champions Jim Furyk and Graeme McDowell, with former PGA champion David Toms, dual 2012 winner Hunter Mahan, Lee Westwood, Jason Dufner, John Senden and Colt Knost also featuring in the first dozen or so.

The Putting Average statistics highlight the names of Bo Van Pelt, Webb Simpson, Zach Johnson, Aaron Baddeley and McDowell again and the

Scrambling stats, the ability to get the ball up and down which is so crucial to challenging at a US Open, ominously highlight Phil Mickelson and Luke Donald as the top two players on Tour in this category with Ian Poulter, Brandt Snedeker, Tiger Woods, Zach Johnson, Kuchar, Toms and Stricker all not surprisingly, high on the list.

To pick an underdog winner from statistics alone would be a folly but taking them into consideration with the form already shown this season, or in similar course conditions in previous big events, a Jason Dufner, Matt Kuchar, Ian Poulter or Graeme McDowell could easily emerge triumphant - hopefully in another 'Olympic' battle with a McIlroy, Donald, Woods or Mickelson this year.

If they do, 91 year old Jack Fleck plans to be on hand to slap them on the back and welcome them to the Olympic club of champions.