

Presidents Cup in U.S. Hands

By Paul Prendergast

Remains



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I've had the most amazing experience with these gentlemen here. We did this as a team, we did this together. We've come up against a very formidable International team and to do it on this special golf course under these conditions was an amazing experience.

Tiger Woods and his United States team tied the biggest Singles haul in Presidents Cup history to overhaul a gallant young Internationals team 16-14 to retain the Cup in a memorable staging at Royal Melbourne Golf Club.

Down 10-8 heading into Sunday, the U.S. won eight matches out of a possible twelve to snatch away the dream from thousands on course and millions watching around Australia and the world, craving just a second Internationals victory in the event dating back to 1994.

For a player with such a prolific and storied career as Woods, finding a 'first' to add to his considerable achievements is a challenge, but winning as a team captain in his debut appearance in the role had the reigning Masters champion gripped by emotion in scenes reminiscent of the 18th green at Augusta earlier last year.

"I've had the most amazing experience with these gentlemen here," Woods said. "We did this as a team, we did this together. We've come up against a very formidable International team and to do it on this special golf course under these conditions was an amazing experience."

Woods also set new standards for a playing captain by going undefeated in three dominant appearances out of a possible five, to partially erase the memory of an inglorious Ryder Cup

for the bulk of this group last year in France.

Sadly for the Internationals, this was a tale of 'so near but yet so far', which could be viewed as a blessing in itself based on recent drubbings, most notably at Liberty National two years ago.

The week promised so much and had started so well for Ernie Els, who, from the day of his announcement as skipper, campaigned for local audiences to get behind the Internationals and not be too supportive of the star-studded American line up that most are so familiar with. Woods' inclusion as a player would have been a blow to that cause, as there's nothing more that galleries delight in than a rare chance to see him play in the flesh.

Australian galleries were no exception to this – and it was clear the largest congregations were around his matches – given Woods' last appearance in this country was at this event in 2011.

Cue the Patrick Reed 'Shovel Gate' affair in the Bahamas and Els' cause was instantly back on track and with ample reinforcements. Following on from fellow player condemnation of Reed's actions, local Larrikins equipped themselves with shovels to mock Reed's exploits in shifting sand in Bahamian waste areas and engaged in a regular commentary with Reed around the course right through until Sunday.



(Back l-r) Assistant Captain Steve Stricker, Patrick Reed, Webb Simpson, Playing Captain Tiger Woods, Matt Kuchar, Gary Woodland, Dustin Johnson, Tony Finau, Xander Schauffele, Bryson DeChambeau, (front l-r) Assistant Captain Fred Couples, Assistant Captain Zach Johnson, Patrick Cantlay, Justin Thomas and Rickie Fowler of the United States team celebrate victory.

Even before his first shot struck on Australian soil in Tuesday's practice round, Reed was greeted at the tee by a gallery member as 'The Excavator', which drew a wry smile and wave from the former Masters champion. Much worse would lie ahead as the week progressed with caddie and brother-in-law Kessler Karain suspended by the PGA TOUR for the final day after shoving a spectator who had crossed the line with aggressive vitriol aimed at his player.

Faced with a depressingly routine pattern of poor starts that have set the scene for loss after loss, Els needed a response from his team, in what has been their Achilles heel over time – the opening Fourball and Foursomes matches. In 2017, the Americans annihilated the Internationals to lead 8-2 before the weekend and in a bid to turn this around, Els and his support team left no statistical or course knowledge stone unturned in a meticulous preparation.

At the end of the first day, a 4-1 lead would have been more than Els could have imagined. Splitting the points in the Friday Foursomes, despite a late surge by the Americans who birdied the final hole in two matches to claw back crucial ½ points, would have inspired confidence that this could finally be the drought-breaking year.

The weekend's 36-holes of Fourballs and Foursomes would always be a critical juncture in this contest and a test of whether the Internationals would sustain their encouraging start. Winning the Saturday morning Fourballs 2.5 – 1.5 suggested they could, but a turning of the tide for the United States in the afternoon Foursomes would be something Els and his captains would have been expecting. They were not disappointed.

Although the U.S. team won the afternoon to trim the overall lead to 10-8, there were some amazing matches and gripping scenes that had the enormous crowds in raptures.

The Leishman/Ancer pairing's performance in halving their match on the final green against Rickie Fowler and Justin Thomas underlined the

DAY ONE Fourball (Internationals 4 – Team US 1)



Abraham Ancer and Louis Oosthuizen shake hands with Gary Woodland and Dustin Johnson, after defeating them 4&3 on the 15th green during the Fourball matches on day one.



C.T. Pan of Taiwan and Hideki Matsuyama, beat Webb Simpson and Patrick Reed 1-up.



Playing Captain Tiger Woods putts to defeat Marc Leishman and Joaquin Niemann 4&3 on the 15th green. His partner was Justin Thomas.



Adam Scott and An Byeong-Hun celebrate after defeating Bryson DeChambeau and Tony Finau 2&1 on the 17th green.



Im Sung-Jae and Adam Hadwin beat Patrick Cantlay and Xander Schauffele 1-up.

DAY TWO Foursomes (Internationals 6½ – Team US 3½)



Abraham Ancer and Marc Leishman beat Patrick Reed and Webb Simpson 3&2.



Adam Scott and Louis Oosthuizen celebrate defeating Dustin Johnson and Matt Kuchar 3&2 during the Friday Foursome matches.



Woods and Justin Thomas celebrate defeating An and Matsuyama 1-up on the 18th green.

difference in this Internationals team to those of recent past. Down by five through the opening 10 holes, but buoyed by vociferous crowd support throughout, the pair showed amazing fortitude to surge back into the match and snatch the most unlikely of half points when the American duo bogeyed the final hole.

Earlier, the Americans had cut the four point deficit in half with victories to Dustin Johnson and Gary Woodland and Xander Schauffele and Patrick Cantlay, who ran the tables with seven birdies to down Cameron Smith and Im Sung-Jae 2/1.

All attention then turned to the last match out on course with Joaquin Niemann and Ben An fighting tooth and nail with Matt Kuchar and Tony Finau. The International pair had never led in the match at any point, but birdied the 14th and 15th to square the match. The combatants could not be separated, halving the match despite some dramatic scenes with both teams missing short birdie putts at the 18th.

The two-point margin in their favour was just the third occasion an International team had taken a lead into a final day. "We had set a target of 10 points by Saturday night, so that's why we were so happy at the end of that day, even though we lost the Foursomes," Els would say later.

Having won three of the past four Singles rubbers – albeit from desperate positions where overall victory was virtually impossible – the Internationals had a little history on their side in a sea of statistics that have overwhelmingly been dominated by the Americans.

While it's hard to pinpoint a weak link in the American line-up, leading off on Sunday with captain Woods, Tony Finau, Patrick Reed and Dustin Johnson certainly looked like a plan to stack the front end to try to make the leaderboard bleed red and create positivity and momentum for the remainder of the team.

That they did, with Woods becoming the winningest American Presidents Cup player with his sublime seven-birdie 3&2 victory over a courageous Abraham Ancer.

DAY THREE **Fourball** (Internationals 9 – Team US 5) **Foursomes** (Internationals 10 – Team US 8)



Captain Ernie Els talks to Matsuyama and C.T. Pan during the third day's Fourball matches. They beat Webb Simpson and Patrick Reed 5&3.



Abraham Ancer celebrates after he and Im Sung-Jae defeated Xander Schauffele and Patrick Cantlay 3&2 during the Fourball matches.



Justin Thomas and Rickie Fowler beat Li Hao-Tong and Marc Leishman 3&2.



Gary Woodland celebrates on the 12th green as Dustin Johnson and Adam Scott look on. They beat Scott and Oosthuizen 2&1 in the afternoon Foursomes.



Patrick Cantlay and Xander Schauffele beat Im Sung-Jae and Cameron Smith in the Foursome matches.



Tony Finau teamed with Matt Kuchar to tie with Niemann and An in the Foursomes.

‘Captain America’ Reed, with replacement caddie on the bag, added to his considerable matchplay gravitas with a 4&2 win over C.T. Pan, while Johnson accounted for the out of sorts Li Hao-Tong 4&3 with his own seven-birdie barrage.

“We threw Patrick out there and he was 6-up and I think anyone looking at that, kind of got very excited,” assistant Fred Couples said. “I know Dustin got 4-up (too). But Xander (Schauffele) to beat Adam Scott on a course that he plays very well was really a huge point.”

Equally huge was the half point Finau was able to snatch from Hideki Matsuyama, building on the momentum the rest of the American team were now starting to ride. The Japanese star was streaking away with a four-hole lead after 10 holes, however, Finau found a hot hand late to birdie five of the remaining eight holes to square the match.

“I knew I couldn’t give up on my team mates and my captains and I know everybody on this team felt the same way,” Finau said of his comeback.

Im Sung-Jae and Australian Cameron Smith had days they’ll tell their grandchildren about, defeating U.S. Open champion Gary Woodland and the red-hot Justin Thomas respectively, although by the time Smith accounted for Thomas at the 17th, the Internationals needed to win the two remaining matches on course to, at best, share the Cup with the rampant Americans.

Matt Kuchar ensured those aspirations were short-lived by birdieing the 17th to guarantee he would at least halve his match with Louis Oosthuizen – ensuring the U.S. would win back the Presidents Cup once again.

The realisation the work invested in this outcome had paid off was too much for Woods, who shed tears of joy with the team entourage and players. And hats off to them for being able to overcome the multiple challenges posed on and off the golf course to claim their 11th Cup.

The loss of world number one Brooks Koepka at short notice might, on paper, appear to have been a huge blow, but his loss was seamlessly filled by Rickie Fowler. Facing an away game is always a challenge, but the Patrick Reed affair that festered on throughout the week can’t have been helpful, despite Woods’ statements to the contrary.

The situation certainly provided ample ammunition for the local galleries to take Reed to task for his indiscretions and until his final day victory, Reed had gone winless in three team matches earlier in the week.

Gallant as they have been until the last few hours of this contest, 2 wins out of 12 Singles matches is the cruel mathematical truth that will haunted the Internationals long after the dust had settled on Royal Melbourne.

While his rookies contributed 11 of their 14 points in a sterling display, it was a deflated group that fronted the media with their most experienced player Adam Scott noting that despite the positives of the week, which had galvanised his intent to do all he could to be back again in 2021, “It’s hard to digest at the moment, it’s very disappointing.”

The tears streaming down the face of Liesl Els as she watched her husband put on a brave face, shows how invested not only the players are in this contest, but their families and support networks behind the scenes.

That said, Els was already looking forward to the future and did not rule out a potential return bout with Tiger Woods at Quail Hollow in 2021.

“It’s going to be tough to swallow, but we do have a great sense of humour in our team. It won’t be long before you see the music or hear the music playing in our team room.

“Nobody died out there. It was a sport and we gave it our all. So, so be it.” ●

DAY FOUR
SINGLES (Internationals 14 – Team US 16)



RESULTS:
INTERNATIONALS – 14 • Team US – 16

DAY ONE
Fourball: Internationals – 4 • Team US – 1

Joaquin Niemann	4&3	Tiger Woods
Marc Leishman		Justin Thomas
Im Sung-Jae	1-up	Patrick Cantlay
Adam Hadwin		Xander Schauffele
An Byeong Hun	2&1	Tony Finau
Adam Scott		Bryson DeChambeau
C.T. Pan	1-up	Patrick Reed
Hideki Matsuyama		Webb Simpson
Louis Oosthuizen	4&3	Gary Woodland
Abraham Ancer		Dustin Johnson

DAY TWO
Foursomes: Internationals – 6½ • Team US – 3½

Adam Scott	3&2	Matt Kuchar
Louis Oosthuizen		Dustin Johnson
Joaquin Niemann	1-up	Patrick Cantlay
Adam Hadwin		Xander Schauffele
Abraham Ancer	3&2	Patrick Reed
Marc Leishman		Webb Simpson
Hideki Matsuyama	1-up	Tiger Woods
An Byeong Hun		Justin Thomas
Cameron Smith	Tied	Rickie Fowler
Im Sung-Jae		Gary Woodland

DAY THREE
Fourball: Internationals – 9 • Team US – 5

Li Hao-Tong	3&2	Rickie Fowler
Marc Leishman		Justin Thomas
Abraham Ancer	3&2	Patrick Cantlay
Im Sung-Jae		Xander Schauffele
C.T. Pan	5&3	Webb Simpson
Hideki Matsuyama		Patrick Reed
An Byeong Hun	Tied	Tony Finau
Adam Scott		Matt Kuchar

Foursomes: Internationals – 10 • Team US – 8

Adam Scott	2&1	Gary Woodland
Louis Oosthuizen		Dustin Johnson
Abraham Ancer	Tied	Rickie Fowler
Marc Leishman		Justin Thomas
Im Sung-Jae	2&1	Patrick Cantlay
Cameron Smith		Xander Schauffele
Joaquin Niemann	Tied	Tony Finau
An Byeong Hun		Matt Kuchar

DAY FOUR
Singles: Internationals – 14 • Team US – 16

Abraham Ancer	3&2	Tiger Woods
Hideki Matsuyama	Tied	Tony Finau
C.T. Pan	4&2	Patrick Reed
Li Hao-Tong	4&3	Dustin Johnson
Adam Hadwin	Tied	Bryson DeChambeau
Im Sung-Jae	4&3	Gary Woodland
Joaquin Niemann	3&2	Patrick Cantlay
Adam Scott	2&1	Xander Schauffele
An Byeong Hun	2&1	Webb Simpson
Cameron Smith	2&1	Justin Thomas
Louis Oosthuizen	Tied	Matt Kuchar
Marc Leishman	Tied	Rickie Fowler