

ERNIE ELS: MAN ON A MISSION

ON A FLYING VISIT TO TALK UP ALL THINGS PRESIDENTS CUP, 2019 INTERNATIONALS CAPTAIN ERNIE ELS CALLED ON AUSSIE FANS TO MAKE THEIR PRESENT FELT AT ROYAL MELBOURNE IN DECEMBER.

WORDS Julie Hockey

Freshly promoted to the International captain's role after being one of four assistants to Nick Price in 2017, Ernie Els displays an air of confidence and positivity – not something you'd necessarily expect, given what some might call the poisoned chalice he's inherited.

With just one victory to the Internationals (1998) since the tournament's inception a quarter of a century ago, Els could be forgiven if he appeared circumspect about his team's prospects in December. Yet, despite the Internationals' chequered history, you had to admire the 49-year-old's assurance as the countdown to the matches at Royal Melbourne gathers momentum.

Students of past lopsided Presidents Cup outcomes will be well versed in the various 'advantages' the US team have enjoyed over their International rivals – the most obvious one being the depth of players competing under one flag, as opposed to the many flags making up an International squad.

It's fair to say the event owners, the PGA Tour, have rarely acquiesced to the impassioned pleas from past International captains for changes around selections and playing formats. Greg Norman argued long and hard for tweaks during his tenure from 2009-2011 and Nick Price was able to prise a little back during his three-Cup term that ended in 2017.

Australian hopes Marc Leishman (left) and Cameron Smith (right).



Ernie Els, captain of the International Team poses for a selfie photo with prospective members of the 2019 International Team including Kiradech Aphibarnrat of Thailand, Anirban Lahiri of India, Kim Si-woo of Korea, Li Haotong of China, Wu Ashun of China, Marc Leishman of Australia, Cameron Smith of Australia, Abraham Ancer of Mexico, Jhonattan Vegas of Venezuela.



Els, it seems, has been able to level the playing field even more. As a result, there's more substance to his message than just inspiring hope among fans and sceptics alike.

He even managed to one-up his old adversary and opposition captain Tiger Woods.

"We've got the [automatic] selection process down to eight, so I can choose four players. If we want to start with the four-ball or foursomes format, it's our choice," Els explained. "It feels a lot more positive already."

"I spoke with Tiger and [commissioner] Jay Monahan, just the three of us, and we went through a lot of stuff. I can play a guy just once before Sunday, if I choose, which was never the case. A guy almost had to play every session."

"Tiger didn't like that much, but I got it through eventually," he grinned. "I feel it's a lot more fair and I think we've got a good shot at it now."

Els also made his first play in the assembly of his backroom

boys by announcing fellow major champion Geoff Ogilvy as a captain's assistant for 2019. Ogilvy's record speaks for itself and Els will enjoy the continuity of having worked with him as a fellow assistant to Price in 2017.

A potential bonus came in the form of Ogilvy and wife Juli's decision to relocate their family from Arizona to Melbourne at the beginning of this year. In breaks from his yet-to-be-determined playing schedule, Ogilvy will have ready access to Royal Melbourne and the team of staff preparing the golf course.

And when I say 'access,' I mean he can quite literally flip a wedge onto the course from the front lawn of the home he grew up in and then bought back when it was put up for sale some years ago. Between Ogilvy and

Els – who still holds the Royal Melbourne Composite Course record of 60 (in a Heineken Classic) – the International squad won't be left wanting for insider knowledge.

IF THE INTERNATIONALS ARE TO TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF THEIR OPPORTUNITIES, THE AUSTRALIAN CROWDS ARE GOING TO HAVE TO GET BEHIND THEIR SIDE IN A WAY THEY'VE NOT ALWAYS DONE.

"The key to Royal Melbourne is how to play it, not really the conditions," said Ogilvy. "Royal Melbourne doesn't show you how to play it; you have to work it out."

"And this guy [Els] again, one of the best players, he's proven he knows Royal Melbourne and I feel I know my way around there a little bit. I think that will be our advantage at Royal Melbourne: not really a setup advantage, more like an experience advantage."

Els and Ogilvy well know that if the Internationals are to take full advantage of their opportunities, the Australian crowds are going to have to get behind their side in a way they've not always done.

Local hopes Cameron Smith and Marc Leishman – both lock-ins for Els' team – got a taste of what's required when they made a three-birdie run at leaders Belgium late on the final day of the World Cup. Their fireworks inspired a loud and passionate response from the galleries.

"Those crowds out there, I've never played with crowds like that in Australia. That was really cool to be part of, having 98 per cent of the crowd going for you is a pretty cool feeling," Leishman said.

Els wants and needs the same from them next December – and more.

At New Jersey's Liberty National Golf Club in 2017, the home team received fanatical, one-eyed support from the

opening tee shot, while the Internationals were at times subjected to brutal comments and language throughout the course of the week. Many players had to back away from their shots from the deliberate noise and 'win at all costs' behaviour by many in the galleries.

Having attended that event, I can say the behaviour crossed the line on many occasions, was barely policed and at times actively encouraged. It had many in the International camp – wives and girlfriends included – seething at the disrespectful treatment and I'm sure the memory will serve as some inspiration for many of the returning players in December.

"Just get enthusiastic about the event, I think. Buy into the team," Ogilvy said when asked how Australian crowds can support their team while intimidating the opposition.

"Quite often it feels like, at the Presidents Cup or two we've had down here, everyone has been just excited to see the American team and are [just] as happy to see them play well as [they are] us."

But expecting that excitement and support to be sustained every day can only come from one thing: winning matches. And preferably early in the piece. In past fixtures a slow start has led to an insurmountable mountain to climb before invariably flying home with a wet sail in the singles matches to salvage some shred of pride from the week.

It's beyond time that pattern was reversed and Els is already sounding as confident about the quality of players straining for his attention.

"We're going to have quite a few Aussies on the team and quite a few South Africans," he said. "And then we're going to have one hell of an International flavour in the team. I mean, we could have 10 or 11 nations represent us.

"I mean, Mexico, with Abraham Ancer winning the Australian Open. Chile – I played with Joaquin Niemann at Sea Island last week. You've got Argentina, Venezuela, swing over to New Zealand, China, Korea, Japan, Thailand, even Malaysia. Canada? We didn't even mention Canada, so there's another one!"

It surely won't hurt the International cause that Woods' annual gathering of well-heeled mates, including the majority of the likely American team, will likely opt to play in his Hero World Challenge in The Bahamas the week before, leaving a seriously long commute around the globe to Melbourne in time for the Cup.

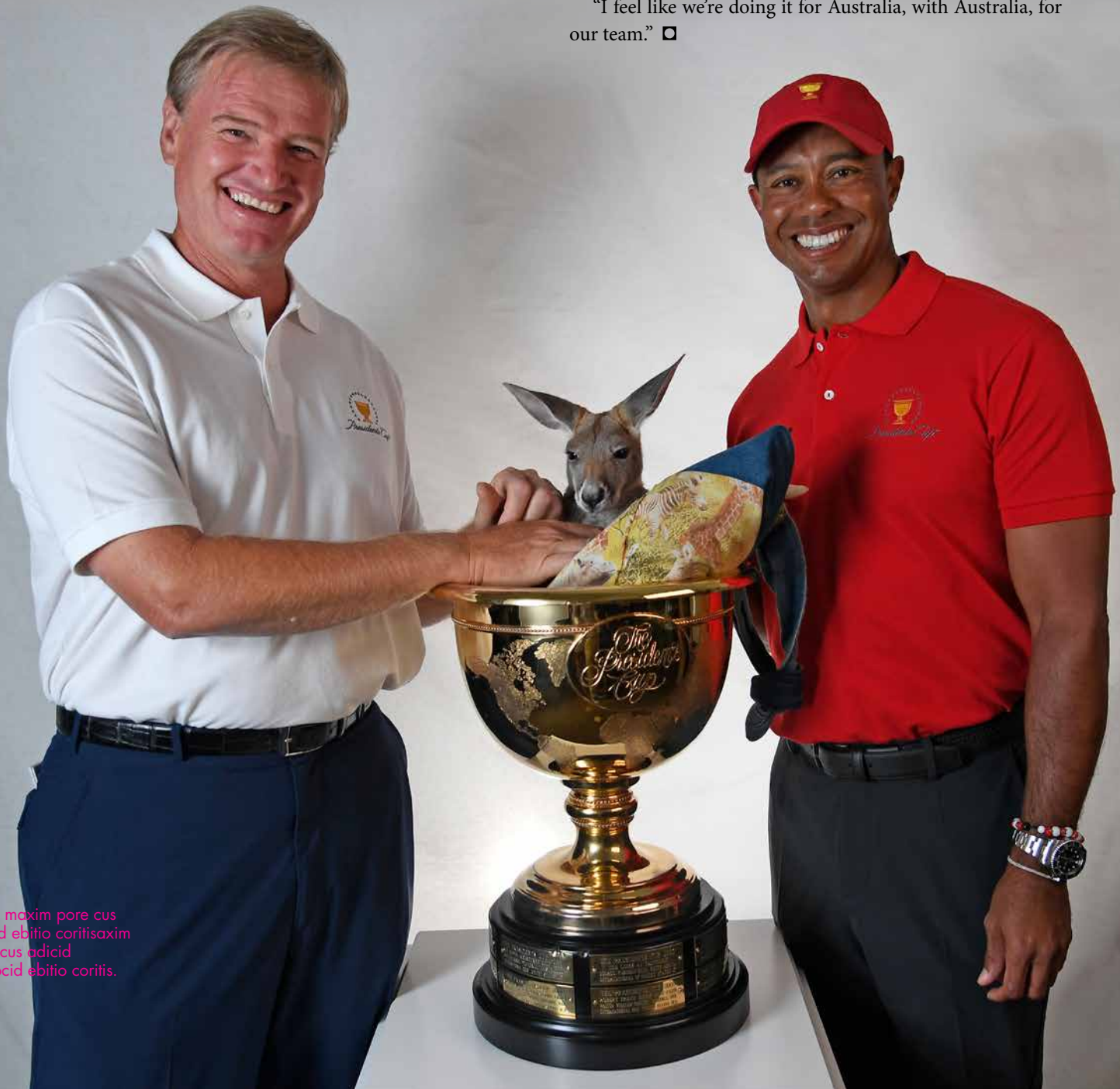
Woods – who has also indicated he'll take on playing duties if he automatically qualifies for his team – is certain to have the greater logistical headache in this regard, although Els' multi-national selection conundrum is likely to pose a few headaches.

But the captain appears unfazed. "I don't think I'm going to have any problem having a motivated team this year. I saw a lot of the guys at the US Open at Shinnecock and again at the CJ Cup in Korea, where we mingled quite a bit. I had dinner with Adam Scott one night and he's very in tune with the goings on and I feel he's very motivated for a big year.

"I'm really looking forward to this group – some old faces, experienced faces and some of the new guard. These youngsters are coming out of everywhere and they're great players. I've already seen that these kids want to play, they want to get involved. They want to make a change.

"We want the crowd right behind us on that first tee, on the first day. We want to respect our visiting team but at the end of the day, we want to beat them and win the cup back.

"I feel like we're doing it for Australia, with Australia, for our team." □



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