

18
PRESIDENTS CUP
9-15 DEC

REKINDLING THE SPIRIT OF '98

IT'S 21 YEARS SINCE THE INTERNATIONALS HAVE BEATEN THE AMERICANS IN A PRESIDENTS CUP – AND THE US TEAM IS LOOKING MIGHTY STRONG IN 2019. BUT THE VAGARIES OF SANDBELT GOLF AND THE NATURE OF GOLF ITSELF MEAN ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN AT ROYAL MELBOURNE IN DECEMBER.

WORDS Paul Prendergast PHOTOS Mark Wilson - Golfplus Media/Getty Images

No one with even a skerrick of interest in the game of golf will be surprised to learn it's been far too long between drinks for the Internationals in biennial Presidents Cup encounters.

By contrast, the All Blacks' complete and utter domination of Bledisloe Cup rugby has continued for less time than the Americans' undefeated run. It's now 21 long years since the Internationals' first and only victory; 16 since they salvaged a draw in the 2003 matches in South Africa. Yes, *The Star Spangled Banner* has rung out with despairing regularity – for non-Americans, at least – over a victorious US team since the cup's inception in 1994.

That lone victory in 1998 at Royal Melbourne – the same venue as the upcoming 2019 matches – was certainly one to savour as the Americans had their proverbial backsides handed to them by a Peter Thomson-led team that featured major winners Greg Norman, Steve Elkington, Nick Price, Vijay Singh and the 2019 Internationals skipper, Ernie Els.

The 20½ to 11½ drubbing of Jack Nicklaus' team remains one of the largest winning margins in Presidents Cup history and there were many heroes among the underdog Internationals. While the big guns on the team certainly played their part in the outcome, it's the performance of the 'middle order and tail' in these contests, against what is always a very talented opposition, that is very much an essential component of victory.

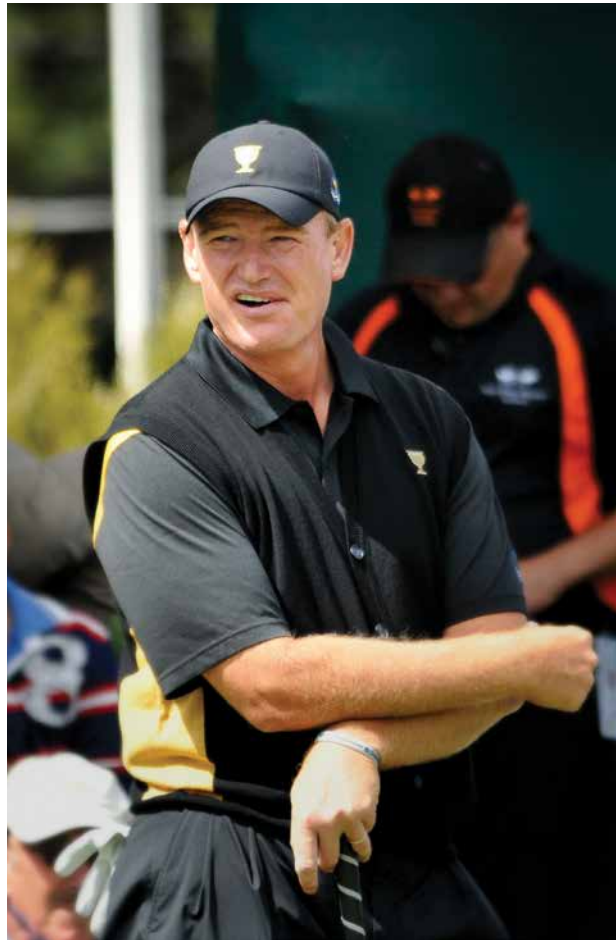
And in 1998, from top to bottom, the Internationals certainly came to play.

Kiwis Greg Turner and Frank Nobilo stepped up in no uncertain terms; rookies Naomichi 'Joe' Ozaki and Stuart Appleby were inspirational; and Japan's Shigeki Maruyama was a smiling assassin throughout, cruising to a 5-win, 0-loss record that would prove to be his career highlight on the world stage.

Assistant captain Wayne Grady stopped the team bus to run back in to the clubhouse to stock up on 'refreshments' (to replace lost fluids) on the drive back to their hotel and triumphant skipper Thomson enthused at the time that it was "the greatest thing I've done" in golf. Halcyon days.



Master negotiator Ernie Els.



Frank Nobilo celebrates a win at the 1998 Presidents Cup.



The victorious 1998 International team featured five major winners, including 2019 skipper Ernie Els.



Rekindling a similar spirit to that of the '98 team has been something Els has been working tirelessly to imbue in his squad since he was named as International captain. There have been player meetings at some of the big events, pairings and nights out in New Orleans during the Zurich Classic and a steady stream of contact and encouragement spilling out to players across the globe from their affable Hall of Fame skipper.

Els wants this badly, as one of his assistant captains (and a guy who jumped the fence as a kid to watch those 1998 heroics), Geoff Ogilvy, explains:

"Ernie and I were both assistants in New York last time and we were talking a lot about what we were going to do next time," Ogilvy said earlier this year.

"A more competitive guy than anyone I have ever met, [that's] Ernie Els. Hyper-competitive. So he's very motivated. He's been very active on the emails and the messages, he's leaving no stone unturned, I'll say that much."

Els has already proven to be a master negotiator, successfully arguing for changes to the format that past skippers have been stonewalled on by the PGA Tour, the owners of the Presidents Cup.

These include expanding the number of captain's picks from two to four and winning the right to sit players out more often ahead of the final day singles, drawing the ire of Els' opposite number on more than the odd occasion.

"Tiger didn't like that much, but I got [them] through eventually," Els smiled.

And if the notion that 'local knowledge' guarantees points, there's arguably no better individual to be leading the Internationals at Royal Melbourne than Els.

Possessing not only a tremendous matchplay record in various individual and team events – including 20 wins at Presidents Cup level – Els is one of the few players from either side who has been a winner at the course; in his case, on three occasions. He also holds the course record with an astounding 12-under 60, shot during one of those victories at the 2004 Heineken Classic.

"I've got a blueprint to play that course because I've played it so well in the past," Els said.

"We're doing a lot of planning and getting the players into the mindset of the golf course even before we get there, so they'll have a good image and a strategy to play the golf course."

It's often the case that being a dozen metres from the hole at Royal Melbourne can be more advantageous than 3m above and Els' blueprint will no doubt include the variety of course set-up situations players are likely to confront: subtleties in the design that dictate preferred angles of play and identifying targets into greens that might appear ultra-conservative from the fairway but from where the risk of big numbers is reduced.

The vagaries of Melbourne weather will feature in discussions, too, because, like St Andrews, conditions there are subject to

change day by day – even hour by hour in many instances.

Rory McIlroy's two-day 63/80 roller-coaster effort at the 2010 Open Championship is a classic case in point, proving the Old Course can be perfectly still and accessible one day, beautifully beastly and soul destroying the next. It's an eerily similar situation with respect to Sandbelt golf and Royal Melbourne in particular.

Participants in the 2011 Presidents Cup got to experience Royal Melbourne at her most devilish when the dreaded 'hot northerly' blew in to render predetermined game plans virtually redundant.

Then-International skipper Greg Norman could barely hide his delight when quizzed on the run about the blustery winds. These were conditions he'd clearly prepped his team to expect, although it was a shame that, at day's end, his own players had been buffeted just as much as the Americans, leaving themselves far too much ground to make up on the final day.

After a day where ball control had proven hellishly difficult on and around the slick and undulating MacKenzie/Russell putting surfaces, Phil Mickelson remarked that he was glad not to have been putting a scorecard in, implying that it would have been extremely ugly.

Such is the charm and the challenge of the storied Composite layout, which, at 6,430m, might appear less challenging for the modern power player than it did 60 years ago when the Composite collection of holes from the club's East

and West courses came into being for the old Canada Cup.

Sandbelt golf, however, requires so much more than pure grunt, particularly when conditions are firm underfoot and the greens are at their frightening best.

"I think the firmness is really fun to play," regular 'RM' visitor and 2019 US team member Matt Kuchar said when on the Sandbelt last year.

"We don't often play courses that are firm and fast and you kind of always guarantee when you're down in Melbourne on the Sandbelt, you're going to get a firm and fast golf course."

Unlike its distant Alister MacKenzie-designed cousin, Augusta National, Royal Melbourne has never been a private club removed from the public gaze for the bulk of each year.

Sixteen Australian Opens, 14 Australian PGA Championships, four World Cups, two Australian Women's Opens and umpteen other professional and amateur events prove the club has welcomed a tantalised public on a regular basis and provided the opportunity for all to enjoy and absorb one of the world's best examples of classic golf-course architecture.

The Composite layout will again undergo a familiar tweak to its sequence of holes for the 2019 cup to cater for, among other things, crowd movement and the probability of some matches concluding earlier than the final hole. The traditional balance of 12 holes from the West and six from the East will be maintained, albeit with an 'out and in' swap of par-3s from the East.

The superbly bunkered par-3 16th from the East will again come into play as the 14th hole, while the iconic par-4 18th East fronting the clubhouse – where Craig Parry holed that famous chip shot to win a match in 1998 – will be ringed by spectator vantage points and corporate suites, but will play as the 16th.

The first eight automatic qualifiers tasked with arresting the 21-year drought for the Internationals showcases an exciting mix of youth and experience, led by Adam Scott, who'll set the Internationals' record for most appearances with his ninth at Royal Melbourne.

Marc Leishman, Louis Oosthuizen, Hideki Matsuyama, Abraham Ancer, Haotong Li, C.T. Pan and Cameron Smith round out the first two-thirds of a truly 'international' team, with the remaining four captain's picks to be named in early November.

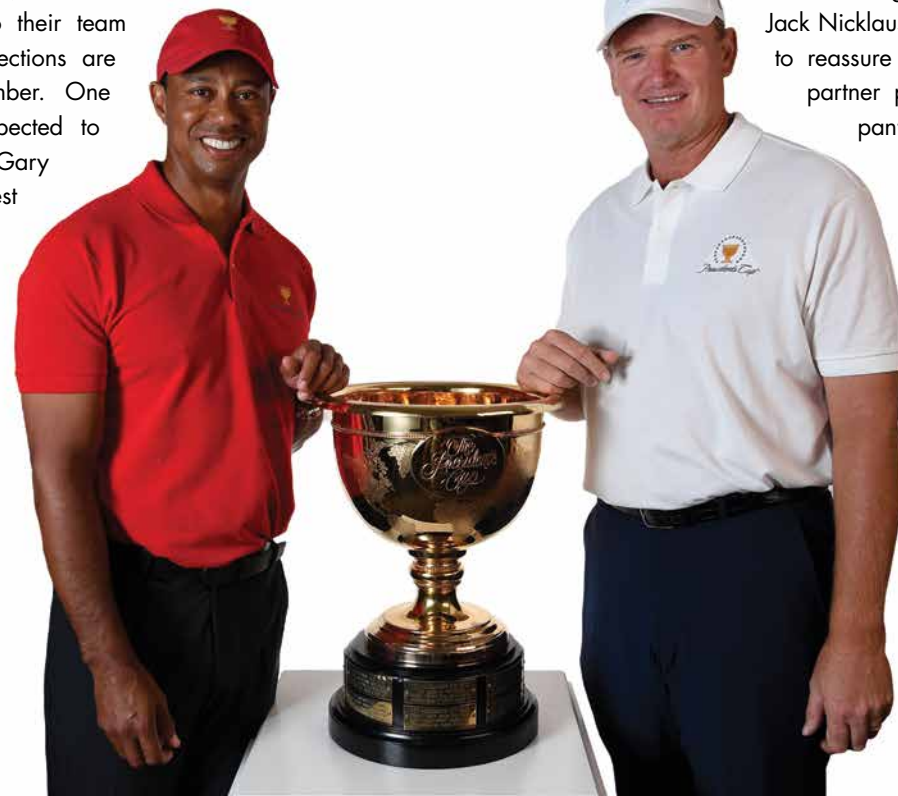
"This is as good as I could have asked for," Els said of this eclectic mix of early qualifiers. "I've got guys who have played in the Presidents Cup many times previously and I've got guys who are rookies."

"The guys who are pillars of our team have really stepped up to take their places in this team. I'm really impressed with how they've conducted themselves and played into the team."

The US team shapes as potentially more formidable than the 2011 version that last appeared in Melbourne, with the presence of (at the time of writing) world No. 1 Brooks Koepka and No. 3 Dustin Johnson as spearheads of another stellar line-up. Recent BMW Championship winner Justin Thomas, Xander Schauffele, Matt Kuchar, Bryson DeChambeau, Patrick Cantlay and Webb Simpson have confirmed their places, with only Johnson, Simpson and Kuchar returning from the 2011 team.

DeChambeau has some local knowledge, as a place-getter in the 2015 Australian Master of the Amateurs Championship, but the remaining Americans will be getting their first look at the course and, in most cases, Sandbelt golf.

The Americans, too, will add the finishing touches to their team when Woods' final selections are made in early November. One of those is widely expected to be US Open champ Gary Woodland, while the rest of the world, it seems, is hoping Woods will pick himself – which would see the current Masters champion as the second player/captain in Presidents Cup history after Hale Irwin in 1994.



American captain Tiger Woods.

International captain Ernie Els.

If the above is a given, who will fill the remaining spots is anyone's guess. All we know is that the number of high-profile candidates, such as Spieth, Reed, Finau, Fowler, Mickelson and Kisner, add up to more than two, so the skipper has a very interesting assignment ahead, with many big names (and perhaps egos) staring down the barrel of an earlier start to Christmas than they would have liked.

Woods has been at pains to point out that the outcome of the 2019 cup is far from guaranteed, despite the stature most of his players hold in the game at present. The memory of the 2018 Ryder Cup drubbing will be a sobering reminder that nothing can ever be taken for granted.

"I've been a part of some pretty amazing teams over the years," Woods said in August. "We had a pretty solid team going down to Australia in '98. We've had some pretty solid teams in Ryder Cups, as well and I've been on the losing end of those."

"That's something that I've told my players."

Woods will be looking for some introspection from his group; looking to influence what they have the ability to control and ensure they're as prepared as they can be following the earlier than normal end to their seasons. A similar approach and an upbeat examination of recent cup history will almost certainly be a focal point for Els in the leadership of his team.

Consider this: the Internationals have either halved or beaten the Americans in singles matches over the past four meetings yet have lost the cup on each occasion. In some cases, the margin of victory has been comprehensive, so it doesn't take a mathematical genius to deduce where things have gone awry in the past.

Finding the spark or chemistry in his pairings that will allow his players to find their feet from day one is the challenge facing Els, just as it did Nick Price and Greg Norman before him. Thursday to Saturday's fourballs and foursomes hold the key, as Thomson's men showed in 1998 when they set up an unassailable lead before the Sunday singles.

At the height of his career, the great Jack Nicklaus had a magnanimous line to reassure many a nervous playing partner prior to battle: "I put my pants on one leg at a time, just like you."

That, I humbly suggest, is exactly the attitude the Internationals need to be adopting if their bid to wrest this oversized golden goblet from of the clutches of Tiger Woods and his crew is to be successful. □



ABOVE: The 173m par-3 16th East, No. 14 on the Composite Course. BELOW: The West Course's 396m 18th hole becomes No. 10 Composite.



UNLOCKING ROYAL MELBOURNE'S SECRETS

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WILL GO A LONG WAY TOWARDS INTERNATIONAL TEAM SUCCESS. ASSISTANT TEAM CAPTAIN GEOFF OGILVY SPILLS THE BEANS TO PAUL PRENDERGAST.



International team assistant captain Geoff Ogilvy's intimate knowledge of Royal Melbourne could prove vital to the team's chances.

Unlike many Ryder Cup or major championship venues, the December staging of the Presidents Cup won't feature a 'special' setup of claustrophobically narrow fairways, choking rough or tees stretched back into neighbouring backyards. This is not the place to be contriving an outcome or orchestrating a particular style of play in order to succeed.

"Royal Melbourne is Royal Melbourne; how it's presented is how it's presented." International assistant captain Geoff Ogilvy explains about the world-famous layout that, purely by the fact that it's being played here, will ensure a thoroughly absorbing spectacle in December:

"It's a fun matchplay course because you're generally on the fairway a lot, as they're quite wide," he says. "It's very much a second shot and around-the-green golf course. It's nice that par isn't relevant in matchplay and Royal Melbourne is great fun to play like that, when you just get to hit the great shots.

"When you get greens like Royal Melbourne's, the ultimate strategy is 'don't miss a green where you can't get it up and down' – which is pretty much every hole at Royal Melbourne.



ABOVE: The 402m par-4 2nd on the East Course becomes the 12th on the Composite Course.
BELOW: The 433m par-4 18th on the East Course: No. 16 during the Presidents Cup.





"I always felt the secret to matchplay was 'seem hard to beat', have your ball on the fairway, have your ball under the hole, make him beat you, don't beat yourself. Philosophically, the whole course is quite well suited for matchplay because of that factor.

"There are some courses where you can miss it around the greens anywhere and it doesn't really matter. At Royal Melbourne, it *really* matters where you miss it. It's a golf course that lends itself to a lot of volatile matches, lots of wins [holes] and lots of losses.

"It starts on the 1st hole [3rd West]. For some of these longer guys, if the conditions are right it's going to be almost driveable, but is that the right play? If you're playing Brooks Koepka and he hits onto the front of the green, now what do you do when you were going to lay it up?"

Ogilvy points out that those who appreciate golf course architecture will understand that, in normal circumstances, the inside of the dogleg is usually the optimum line on most dogleg holes. On the 1st, though, he considers the outside of the dogleg to be the best line off the tee, as that squares up the angle over

the swale passing diagonally across the front and side of the putting surface.

"It's a bit counter-intuitive, that hole, so you get some really interesting stuff from the very first hole. And that happens all around Royal Melbourne – little things like that that aren't obvious," he says.

"The most obvious matchplay strategy hole will be No. 6 [10th West], which is the classic 'driver at the green or hit a 3-iron in the fairway and a nice little wedge'. It's actually gotten better through time, because now driver is too much club and all 24 players are going to be able to get it to the green if they want.

"And generally with PGA Tour players and pros around the world now, there's not a lot of laying-up going on anymore. So that could be interesting. If the first guy hits it on or near the green, it sort of forces the other guy's hand to go for the green even if he might not want to.

"There are stories of Seve Ballesteros, back in the day, when he drove it into that sandy waste left of that green on purpose and just got it up and down. So the short par-4s like these are always very interesting in matchplay. But aside from that,

knowing where to miss your shots: maybe 30 feet under the hole is better than 20 above in most situations.

"Number 4 [6th West] has always been like that. If a guy hits it over the back left bunker or hits it short and it runs all the way back down the slope in front of the bunker, you've got a massive advantage if you see him do that, because now you can play accordingly.

"The 18th [2nd West], the way they'll play it, is a great finishing hole: severe green and you really have to hit a good tee shot nowadays. Unlike in the past, every player can blow it through the fairway into the tree now, so you have to take on the bunkers on the right or some guys might hit a 3-wood off the tee.

"The 16th [18th East] is obviously just – what a hole – you have to drive it up the left if the pin is on the right or you just have absolutely no chance to get near it.

"On some of those greens, playing second can sometimes be an advantage when you know he's going to make a bogey from where he just hit it. When you have greens that severe and the strategy of where to or not to hit it aren't obvious, you're going

to get interesting situations that force guys to hit shots they might not want to hit.

"It's a course where you can tell if a guy is about to make a bogey right after he's hit his second shot and he can probably tell that about you, too. The way you play [in matchplay situations] is very much dictated by how the other guy is playing, more so than at other places."

Ogilvy hopes the potential advantage the Internationals can derive will come from a core group of players and captains that know the course a little better than their likely opposition could possibly hope to. Fast-tracking the education of the group on where the good and bad spots are, the nuances that they can readily expect, will be key.

"We've got Scotty, probably Jason [Day] and Ernie – who has the course record there – so we have more Royal Melbourne history and knowledge than they do. Hopefully, we can speed up the education curve of our team so we maybe know a little more about things like sneaky pins than they do.

"That's why Royal Melbourne is so great: it's not always obvious where the good spots are." □