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Shoot the (Half) Moon

THE WORLD TEAM OPEN GIVES AMATEURS A CHANCE AT TV GLORY, BIG MONEY AND A 'MAJOR' VICTORY FOR THE AVERAGE JOE

By Vic Williams

We've all heard the brutal statistics: 90 percent of American golfers never see the south side of 100. A pot bunker-ful break 90 on a regular basis, and only a sliver of the general population ever break 80.

Well, screw that. A lot of us might suck, but we're millions strong — so it figures that tens of thousands of us are almost good enough to turn professional ... but not quite.

We'll find ourselves on the tee with them now and again. They become our friends over 18 holes, and though we admire their talent, they're pretty much just like us. Doctors, insurance agents, salesmen, small business owners, students, teachers, preachers, firemen, cops ... they can really swing the sticks and wield the wand, and within their small spheres of influence, or perhaps just in their own minds, they're on a par with the Tigers and Ernies of the world.

In reality, they're anonymous to the world, and even a berth in one of the USGA's marquee amateur events won't change that. Who but hardcore or fellow scratch wannabes turn more than a passing glance to the PubLinks or U.S. Amateur, unless a guy like Tiger is involved? And those are individual events; as a team deal, the game gets even less respect in America — in most of the world, for that matter. Go beyond the Ryder Cup or Presidents Cup and the whole concept of team golf takes a precipitous tumble into the void of apathy.

That's gonna change this summer.

Welcome to The Glenlivet World Team Open, a two-month-long, nationwide tournament that puts American Idol on the golf course. Actually, when all the preliminary rounds of competition are complete, it finds one — make that two — amateur stars on the course, in this case the Old Course at Half Moon Bay, where 32 teams vie for \$25,000 in the final round, and presents them to a national Golf Channel audience.

"We're trying to bring recognition to amateur golfers, and that's very tough," says Eric Parton, tournament founder and CEO of Emdal Sports, the tournament's parent company. "You must have media attention or you don't exist. We love the fact that reality television has come to be so popular with American Idol, Survivor and Fear Factor, and other shows in that entertainment genre. We said, 'Now is the right time' — to invite quality amateur golfers who play an excellent game but aren't pros, never will be pros for the most part, and give them a platform to be appreciated for what they've accomplished in golf."

Entry fee is \$3,000 per team, most of which, organizers hope, will be picked up by local



businessmen looking for an extra marketing edge and, if their team goes all the way, up to a cool thirty grand of their own.

“One fat cat pays for a team and puts his own business as a sponsor — that’s the number one way we’re picking up teams,” Parton says. “The second way is a local retailer will sponsor a team, hold a contest or use it as a promotional vehicle for their business, to get players to come into their store so they can identify the good players.”

The event is actually a decade in the making, the brainchild of longtime NBC Sports executive Bert Zeldin, who helped create the original Celebrity Golf Championship at Lake Tahoe — now one of NBC’s ratings darlings — and the PGA Tour’s Lincoln-Mercury Kapalua Invitational. Zeldin died of cancer in 1998, and for a while so did his dream of producing a marquee, top-of-the-line amateur event.

Two years ago, Pardon and his Emdal Sports decided to resurrect the plan, and felt the time was right to go for it and keep Zeldin’s spirit alive. A portion of WTO’s proceeds will help the Bertram J. Zeldin Foundation build “Bert’s House,” an Upstate New York retreat for cancer patients and their families.

“This tournament has the pedigree of a guy who built two of the most popular and famous golf events that are unique in their own right,” Parton says. “We want to reach that kind of stature. Team golf hasn’t got there, not in the amateur field. We want to be way up there in the amateur elite — the kind of event that every amateur says, ‘If I play for competitive reasons in a tournament, that’s the one I want to play in.’”

The format is radical but simple: Up to 2,048 teams will fill 32 regions. Every other Saturday, starting August 13, each team will play a no-handicap, low-gross single-elimination round, using only the best three scores for each team. Winners advance until all 32 regional champions are crowned.

The first round is head-to-head — best three holes out of four. Then it’s on to a stroke-play round at the same course as the first to keep travel to a minimum. Again, the worst score on each team is thrown out. The third round is match play again, which leaves eight finalists per region, who revert to stroke play. The final 32 teams convene on the coast for a shot at the big bucks. Again, it’s stroke play — best three rounds from each group — only this time, each group is accompanied by a celebrity (whose score doesn’t count in their tally), not to mention TV cameras and thousands of spectators lining the Old Course’s final three holes.

“The celebrities are there for several reasons — one, to attract the cameras, and help us attract tournament-wide sponsorship and media attention,” says David Jacobson, the tournament’s communications director. “And also to give a certain flavor to it; we’re far from the AT&T [in size and fame], but we’re just up the road a piece [from the Monterey Peninsula], and that format has been known to succeed regionally and nationally.”

Indeed it has; outside the majors and a couple other events, the AT&T is the most-watched professional tournament on television. Jacobsen, Parton and the rest of their team dream of the day their product commands that kind of pull on the amateur side, but for now, they want to create the kind of drama seen on such popular prime time shows as *The Contender* — hard-hitting humanity delivered with one golf glove instead of two boxing gloves. And like Sylvester Stallone’s stable of ring-tested fighters, the WTO finalists are likely to be solid sticks.

“Each regional final team will probably be stocked with single-digit players,” Jacobsen says. “In my day-to-day contact with players, some of them fear that it will be nothing but four college kids out there who spank the living daylights out of it. This isn’t really for them — it is for people in their mid-30s to mid-40s, ‘coulda been a contender,’ those type of guys. That’s where we’re

seeing the most action.”

Women players are also welcome — encouraged, in fact. “We want to have a lot of female competition,” Parton says. “We feel there are advantages in the way that it’s match play-medal play alternate. The way we give women in the tournament a key advantage [playing shorter tees, for instance]. All that makes it a balanced playing field. Annika Sorenstam could win this one, and she wouldn’t have to play from the blue tees.”

When the action is compiled for an hourlong special on The Golf Channel in November, fans won’t see anything resembling traditional PGA or LPGA coverage that still adheres to the ball-in-flight model. The WTO’s show — hosted and produced by the folks who head up the popular Bay Area “Hooked On Golf” program — will train the cameras in a much different direction.

“It’ll be a ‘David and Goliath’ type character presentation, more than technically a golf competition,” Parton says. “The highlights won’t be a lot of balls flying in the air; it’s gonna be a lot more about, ‘This guy’s a dentist during the week, and the other guy is a truck driver.’ The way they’ll do vignettes of the characters is something I don’t think has ever been on television. And we won’t know who the story is until they get here — will we have ‘Omarosa’ in one of the groups? We’re sure hopin’ so.”

Only thing is, Donald Trump won’t be the one uttering the immortal words, “You’re fired.” It’ll be the golf gods blessing or damning each team — which foursome survives another round, which takes a taxi home.

Every round is played on a Saturday by USGA rules, with each venue’s club or teaching professional running the local events per special WTO instructions. In many cases, those same pros will also help recruit teams in their area, at a “spiff” of \$250 per team, with a shot at the \$30,000 sponsor’s booty, as well. West Coast courses under consideration include Olympic Club in San Francisco, Pumpkin Ridge near Portland, Rio Secco in Las Vegas, Oak Quarry in Riverside and other tasty tracks.

“We’ve concentrated on the more populous areas because that’s where we’ll get the most participation,” Jacobson says. Adds Parton, “It’s where the golf teams come from that dictates ultimately which courses we finalize. We have to have positive communication going with 700 or 800 courses because in the end 200 or 300 of those aren’t going to be invited.”

Since a maximum of 16 players meet at each course for the first round, and only eight for the second, there should be no issues working them into the tee sheet. Players must get to the preliminary events on their own dime, but the finalists get an all-expenses-paid trip to Half Moon Bay, plus, of course, the chance to go to battle with such celebs as former NFL player and CBS commentator Irv Cross, Cy Young winner and MVP Vida Blue and 30 others.

The finals take place during Half Moon Bay’s Pumpkin Festival, which brings 300,000 people to that little seaside town — halfway between San Francisco and Santa Cruz — in one weekend. Which means up to 30,000 people could find themselves lining the Old Course’s exquisite final three holes, which tumble toward and along the Pacific (pictured).

“This will be a unique experience for the amateurs, so for most of them — coming from Iowa, Texas, Nebraska — they will not have seen anything like Half Moon Bay with 20,000 spectators,” Parton says. “The 18th hole is an absolute perfect postcard for television. And Half Moon Bay is our permanent home.”

But will it also be the place where history is made, where the worlds of golf and reality television collide and amateurs get their due — or perhaps become pros on the spot, should they decide to take the money and surrender their amateur status?

“Cojones are gonna rise that day — we’ll see who can do it,” Parton says. “It’s between them and the USGA. Their option is to accept the prize money or donate to the Bert Zelden Foundation. It’s paid out one way or the other.”

Which should make the World Team Open irresistible for that considerable “sliver” of golfers out there who can really play.

“Remember, to win you only have to beat three other teams,” Parton says. “Think of it that way, and your odds are quite high. You’ve really got a 50 percent chance of advancing every week. It might be the best chance you’ll ever have.”

For more information on The Glenlivet World Team Open, visit www.worldteamopen.com

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