

In the end, the Ryder Cup was great advertising for golf. It was the top sports story in newspapers and on radio stations across the country. But more importantly to golf's marketers, the event compelled the Joe Blows of the world to get out of their easy chairs and play 18.

"An event like this puts us on the front page," says Rick Norton, a consultant for the National Golf Foundation, whose mission is to foster the growth and economics of golf. "When you get front-page treatment, more people are exposed to the game."

Norton and others who sell the game to the masses are grateful for the Ryder Cup's dramatic and inspiring conclusion — especially after it nearly flopped. The event dodged disgrace like a bad iron shot bouncing over a bunker and onto the green.

For all of its thrilling moments, some of the Ryder Cup wasn't easy to watch, especially the nonsense before play even began.

The Ryder Cup is to golf what the World Series is to baseball. That's why many in the industry were fuming when David Duval and Tiger Woods griped about the fate of the money generated by the event. Then Woods called the Ryder Cup a "large corporate outing," and Duval labeled it "an exhibition." Here were the sport's two main stars ragging on the Ryder Cup, which is the Holy Grail in the golf world's eyes. Can you imagine Atlanta Braves pitcher Greg Maddux and New York Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter calling the World Series an exhibition?

You want golf's two best players to be mentors, not malcontents. But it was easy to view Woods' and Duval's remarks as selfish and typical for today's professional athletes.

It was a discouraging moment for all of us who care about the image of the game. For years, we've been trying to rid the sport of its hoity-toity label, and here were Woods and Duval taking haughtiness to another level.

But finally, more than a painful month later, the fuss faded, and the Ryder Cup began. Despite any remaining cynicism, most sports fans seemed excited — until the first day of play ended and the Europeans held a 6-2 lead. It didn't get much better after the second day

They're Still Buzzing About the Ryder Cup

BY LARRY AYLWARD



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when the Europeans held a 10-6 lead. But then the extraordinary final segment of this *North and South*-like miniseries began. It started with the spiritual team captain, Ben Crenshaw, talking of fate and hope. Golf's marketers wanted to shout, "Hallelujah."

Then the Americans went to work on the last day. They won the first six matches to take the lead. And then Justin Leonard sank that birdie putt on 17 to complete the conquest. The comeback was astonishing.

And it was thrilling to see the normally guarded Duval pump his fist in the air after making great shot after great shot. It was stirring to see Woods wear more emotions on his face than Joe Cocker when singing *You Are So Beautiful*. It was like Duval and Woods finally realized the essence of the Ryder Cup, like the Grinch finally discovered the true meaning of Christmas. Woods and Duval redeemed themselves for their prior remarks, and fans quickly forgave them.

Norton and other promoters were ecstatic. They know what a thrilling ending like this can do for the sport.

"Even for the casual sports fan, the Ryder Cup was great drama," Norton says. "It will have a positive impact on people who are on the fence about golf. It will get them to say, 'Hey, let's go try that game.'"

NGF estimates there are 41 million people who would like to try playing golf or play more in the future. In two years, Norton expects to look back at the post-1999 Ryder Cup and see an increase of players nationally.

"It was terrific public relations," he says.

After what could have been, the game's marketers thank the forgiving golf gods for that.

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