



Thanks in part to Tiger Woods, the U.S. Open at Torrey Pines was the year's most memorable Major and, perhaps, golfing event.

# What a Wild Year

It was exciting, transformational, controversial, wacky and — like everything else — affected by the slow economy

STORY/PHOTOS BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**I**t was the best of times and ... well ... you know. That economic collapse thing sure put a damper on an epic, even transformational year in golf.

Epic because the potential for golf to thrill and inspire became apparent again, just when you thought we were doomed by technology and dull championships. Transformational because the world saw just how magical of a setting that a properly configured golf course can be.

Sure, there were a few salty stories and plenty of signs that the game was in for a big hurt when the economy slowed down, such as a dip in rounds and golf course construction. But the indelible image of 2008 and beyond arrived with Tiger Woods' epic U.S. Open win at Torrey Pines in San Diego. And while he did the heavy lifting — holding off the feisty Rocco Mediate in an unforgettable playoff watched by enormous audiences — equal credit goes to humble behind-the-scenes string-pulling by Torrey Pines' Certified Superintendent Mark Woodward and United States Golf Association's Senior Director of Rules and Competitions Mike Davis, who was in charge of setting up the course. Their work, and the sweat of hundreds of volunteers, produced the greatest week of golf since the 1986 Masters.

Before that epic week in June and a classic Ryder Cup win by America fueled almost entirely by shrewd golf course preparation, 2008 proved more bizarre than exciting. At the PGA of America's Economic Forum in January, we learned that golf course facilities make up a \$28 billion industry, making the business bigger (at least in the PGA's eyes) than the motion-picture industry, newspaper publishing and all other sports.

"Golf generates more money than any other sport in the world that we know of," said Steve Mona, executive director of the World Golf Foundation and former CEO of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. Of course, no one really bought the numbers since they included wedding and banquet revenue and inflated real estate numbers.

That wasn't the only bizarre study, as researchers working off a \$193,000 grant from Allergan discovered the cure for the yips — Botox! That's the drug used for muscle cramping, Parkinson's disease and mostly for politicians and aging beauty queens to reduce skin wrinkles. The maker of Botox? Allergan!

The news wasn't all weird, though. At times, it was downright disastrous. In January, Golf Channel announcer Kelly Tilghman was yucking it up during the PGA Tour's



season-opening Mercedes Championship telecast with announce partner Nick Faldo when she suggested that Tiger's fellow tour players might want to lynch him in a back alley. The comment drew widespread condemnation from everyone on the planet, including President George Bush and just about every other American pundit dying for another three minutes in front of a microphone. Just when you thought the controversy was dying down, it tipped into absurdity when Golfweek Editor Dave Seanor ran an image of a noose on the weekly's cover. That brilliant decision turned out to be more of a black eye for the game than Tilghman's thoughtless but ultimately harmless comment.

"Clearly, what Kelly said was inappropriate and unfortunate, and she obviously regrets her choice of words," PGA Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem said. "But we consider Golfweek's imagery of a swinging noose on its cover to be outrageous and irresponsible. It smacks of tabloid journalism. It was a naked attempt to inflame and keep alive an incident that was heading to an appropriate conclusion."

Seanor was quickly relieved of his duties and the game moved on. Slowly.

Yes, slow play made its annual appearance in stories about the PGA Tour and everyday game. In 2008, the talk turned a bit nastier, spurred on by Woods and other top players making public comments. And there was a five-hour round for Sunday twosomes at the Masters, but mostly widespread astonishment that the PGA Tour had not levied a two-shot penalty for slow play in 16 years.

However, the LPGA Tour made news by enforcing its policy on Angela Park at its Hawaii stop, providing bulletin-board fodder for golf courses across the land. Park finished only one stroke behind eventual winner Annika Sorenstam, but a triple-bogey seven at No. 10 gave her a final-round 69 — 209 and a tie for fifth that cost her \$60,000 (at least). Park's triple came after rules official Doug Brecht gave her a two-shot penalty for taking too long.

"I didn't think it was fair at all," Park told the media. She was the only one in her threesome to be penalized after being put on the clock at the 10th tee. "When he (rules official Doug Brecht) came up to me and penalized

me, I was like, you know where I am on this leaderboard? You have any idea?"

The LPGA earned rave reviews for making an issue of the embarrassing rituals that today's players make fans endure. Meanwhile, the world's best male players continued to make a mockery of the sport while setting a horrible example for younger players. In Europe, they've taken notice that this is, in large part, an American problem. The Irish Independent's Karl MacGinty was one of many noted Euro writers to vent about Sean O'Hair not being prepared to play when it was his turn down the stretch at Bay Hill.

"OK, O'Hair's not as mind-numbingly slow as JB Holmes, the mega-hitter from Kentucky," MacGinty wrote. "This guy is utterly infuriating. Holmes resembles a preying mantis painstakingly stalking its lunch as he goes through his staccato pre-shout routine."

Holmes salvaged some respect for his solid performance at September's epic Ryder Cup, where Paul Azinger made him one of four captain's picks. But it was Azinger's setup of Valhalla Golf Club that made the Ryder Cup so memorable. Carried out in close conjunction with superintendent Mark Wilson, Azinger expanded the course's intermediate rough cut from a standard 6 feet to as much as 60 feet, effectively eliminating the role of rough. The result? Some of the most thrilling, heroic and bold play the game has seen in ages. Both teams attributed the genius of play to

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**The USGA's Mike Davis emphasized mental examination over an excessively physical one in his setup at Torrey Pines.**





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Azinger's and Wilson's democratic presentation of Valhalla.

Though Azinger had been contemplating the concept since being named captain, it is still unlikely that such a bold move would have been attempted had Davis not set a dramatic precedent with his totally un-USGA-like setup of Torrey Pines' South Course. While some shrugged off the epic week in San Diego to Tiger or the dreary Masters finish where Trevor Immelman survived a car-wreck finish in cruel weather, the U.S. Open allowed most players and media to make a connection between course setup and fun golf.

Davis, manning his third U.S. Open as the person in charge of the competition, watched tapes of the 2007 event at Oakmont Country Club and determined the rough was too penal. A memo went out to future Open venues warning that it was time to put less emphasis on the density of rough, with Torrey Pines serving as the testing ground. While bizarre weather spurred on the growth of kikuyugrass to the dismay of everyone involved, Woodward and his team took a run-down muni and managed to get Torrey Pines as firm and meticulous for which Davis could have hoped.

The metamorphosis turned the U.S. Open spotlight away from course conditioning questions to the unique setup touches envisioned by Davis to emphasize a supreme mental examination over an excessively physical one. But it was Davis' decision to alternate tees and turn the grueling 14th hole into a driveable par 4 on Sunday that earned raves and had golfers across the country glued to their televisions.

Airing in prime time on the East Coast, Sunday's telecast drew an 8.5 rating, up 21 percent from the previous year. More importantly, non-golfers tuned in for the final thrilling hour and set Internet viewing records for the following day's playoff, where Woods edged Mediate on the 19th hole.

In a magical transformation, the U.S. Open became the most complete and interesting Major championship. More importantly, by maintaining the difficulty and test of skill that is the Open's trademark, the USGA gave golf professionals and superintendents an example for the ages. They proved that a golf

course could be set up with just an ounce of creativity and vision to test players without embarrassing them.

But even more significant, that remarkable week at Torrey Pines inspired new admiration for the people and courses that make up the sport. The combination of thrilling play, heart-stopping heroics and an inspired course setup reminded the world why golf matters. ■

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