

VITAL STATS

Established in 1927 as a contest between the US and Great Britain, the **Ryder Cup** has been a match between the US and Europe since 1979. Held every other year, the US leads 25 to 13, with two ties; since 1985, Europe has won 10 out of 14, with one tie



Triumphant Ryder Cup
Captain **PAUL MCGINLEY**
explains how data helped
his team to a famous
victory in the Ryder Cup
golf tournament.

Interview by Brunswick's
SIMON SPORBORG
and **MAX MCGAHAN**



How did data analysis inform your player selections for the Ryder Cup?

Before we did anything else, I had a statistical analysis done on what I considered to be the examination paper for success in the tournament – the Gleneagles course. We trawled through the previous 10 years of Johnnie Walker Championships there and looked for trends in terms of the guys who had played well. What did they do particularly well? Were they big hitters or short hitters? Did they make a lot of birdies? Did they kill the par fives, did they kill the par threes? That statistical analysis helped form my opinion of the kind of players I needed.

I gathered information on players for two years leading up to the Ryder Cup, right from when I was appointed captain. Our dedicated data analytics team followed every single player who might have ended up in the team – but without anyone knowing about it. I didn't want the players to know they were being tracked, but I needed the information. The more data I had, the more educated decisions I could make.

As we got closer to the tournament, I had stats on all the players, but this wasn't going to be about simply picking the best 12 players around. It was about choosing the three wild cards who would join the nine players who had qualified automatically and who together would be the best qualified team to sit the exam at Gleneagles.

How much of your strategy was data-driven and how much based on your gut feel?

It's a balance. You need all the data but you have to overlay that with your experience and judgment. For example, Victor Dubuisson was going to be a rookie at Gleneagles so I wanted to pair him with an experienced guy. The stats team was telling me that Victor and Graeme McDowell would be a good combination, but I wanted to see them interact and make sure there were no issues. I had control over the draws in the first two rounds of the European Tour for the two years leading up to the Ryder Cup, →

Team Europe hoists Captain Paul McGinley aloft and celebrates its Ryder Cup victory at Gleneagles in September 2014. "The key thing I said to the players on the very first day was that we are going to win this Ryder Cup with 12 players," says McGinley. "Not eight, not three or four, not because we have Rory McIlroy on our team. We are going to win it with 12 – that is our strength"

so every time Graeme came over to play in Europe and Victor was playing in the same tournament, I would pair them together in the first two rounds. I didn't explain. I just put them together, making sure their caddies got to know each other, making sure the players were comfortable spending four or five hours on the course together for two days in a row and in a competitive arena. It allowed me to confirm what the stats were telling us. It paid off: in the Ryder Cup they won both of their matches against two strong American pairings.

Was your strategy set in stone by the time you arrived at Gleneagles, or did you make adjustments as you went along?

I had a plan and I would say I stuck to that 85 percent. But there's always bobbing and weaving in a Ryder Cup. It happens at breakneck speed and you have to be ready to react.

The person I really learned from in that regard was Nigel Mansell, the Formula One and IndyCar champion, who I know quite well. When he was driving, he would have a plan in place to get to that first corner, but of course he didn't know what the other drivers were going to do. So the night before the race, he would visualize how he would react to the other drivers making all the different moves they might attempt. That meant that whatever actually happened, he was able to glide into the appropriate strategy without a whole lot of conscious thought.

That's very much the approach I tried to have for the Ryder Cup. I had a master plan but I had to be flexible depending on how we were doing, what the score was and how the team was playing.

How did you adjust your strategy under pressure?

Being informed is critical to making good decisions, especially in the heat of battle. That's one of the reasons why I had five vice-captains, guys I trusted implicitly, who I knew could read the game correctly and give

"The ironic thing is that the more I let them be individuals ... the more they actually bonded with each other"

me accurate feedback, so I could make the right decisions.

One of the things you need to be prepared for in the Ryder Cup is making decisions for the afternoon session while the morning matches are still on the course. I saw my job not as being a cheerleader, but concentrating on the next move. But I still needed people on the front line and chose them very, very, very carefully – lieutenants I respected and trusted, and who I knew would give me information without an agenda. While the morning session was under way, I was plotting the afternoon. All my vice-captains knew my original plan each day, but I would use their feedback to either confirm or slightly adjust those plans.

Many athletes talk about the need to have a clear mind when competing. Wasn't there a risk that all the statistics might hinder your players' performance, rather than optimize it?

You have to know how much information each player needs to perform at their best. Some need a lot of data in order to feel good – Justin Rose, for example. He is a very structured, organized guy. The more information you give Justin and the bigger picture you show him of what you're trying to do, the more he's able to focus. But with some players, that doesn't work.

You just tell them, "You're going out there, you're going to do A, B and C, and that's all you need to know." It all comes down to knowing your players.

Europe has dominated the Ryder Cup in recent years. Did you feel you had permission to do things your way?

One of the things I said at my first press conference after being appointed captain was that I was inheriting a team that had won seven of the last nine Ryder Cups – I was inheriting a successful template. And I'm a great believer in, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." But even if you have a winning formula, it can't stay static, it needs to evolve. That was my policy.

A lot of what I did wasn't groundbreaking, it wasn't left-field, but it was the evolution of a template that had worked. For example, Team Europe had always used statistics, but only in a very simple way, taking information off the internet. What I did as captain was employ a full-time data analytics team, which had never been done before.

Golf is usually an individual sport. How did you create a team for those three days of competition?

For 103 weeks of the 104-week two-year cycle, these guys play very much as individuals. Then for one week every two years, they come together for the Ryder Cup. The team is only formalized three-and-a-half weeks before the event, so you're not going to have any training weekends or dinners together. They all arrive on your doorstep on the Monday morning at the tournament venue, and you have to mold them into a team in a very short space of time. That's what makes the Ryder Cup captaincy so challenging. I was clear that I wanted

the players to remain individuals and didn't worry too much about shaping them into a team. I thought they would retain a lot of their strengths if I treated them as individuals and didn't necessarily

Captain Paul McGinley grabs Jamie Donaldson after Donaldson's stunning second shot on the 15th green secures the Ryder Cup for Team Europe



burden them too much with trying to be teammates with each other. The ironic thing is that the more I let them be individuals – the more I took those shackles off and didn't burden them with that expectation and structure – the more they actually bonded with each other.

Team Europe arrived at Gleneagles as favorites. How did you guard against complacency – and help the players to handle the pressure?

It's well known that Sir Alex Ferguson, the legendary Manchester United soccer manager, was very much involved in the campaign, certainly during the last 12 months. In 95 percent of matches that Manchester United played under Sir Alex, they were favorites to win. I knew that we were going to have a similar challenge going into the Ryder Cup. We had Rory McIlroy, the number one player in the world, on our team and four of the top six players in the world rankings. There were big expectations on our shoulders. A lot of people suffocate under that kind of pressure. I knew that Sir Alex could help to guide me through that challenge. Over the final 12 months he was the guy that I communicated with most and he came and spoke to the team on the Tuesday night before the competition kicked off.

One of the things I consulted him about was how he created that trademark relentlessness, that wave after wave of attack, because there is nothing tougher to face as an opponent. I told my players that we were going to keep hammering at that door, we were going to beat them down with wave after wave after wave of attack.

The Ryder Cup is a such a high-profile tournament. How did you make sure the players weren't overwhelmed?

It was up to me to create a positive environment and let them play freely. I didn't impose too much structure on

them or create a tense – or intense – environment.

Something I really encouraged was that we see the challenge as fun. If we didn't – if they weren't invigorated by playing in front of 55,000 people – then there was no point in playing. When you enjoy something, the chances are you're going to be successful. So I made sure that we created a fun environment. I wanted the players to be stood over a putt thinking, "Man, if I hole this putt from eight feet, this crowd is going to go absolutely ballistic." So, rather than be fearful, it was fun.

That was how I felt as a player. I couldn't wait to hit the putt, because I couldn't wait to hear the crowd's reaction. That's what I tried to encourage, and the vice-captains and Alex Ferguson too. Yes, this is one of the biggest sporting events in the world, and yes there is pressure and expectation, but it's also a huge amount of fun.

Obviously as we got closer to the event the players got more nervous and the intensity inevitably ramped up. I was aware that my body language was also very important, to be comfortable and relaxed. At no stage did I get either too high or too low; I was very calm throughout the whole week, and that was a conscious decision.

How did you assert your leadership?

It helps that I've been playing on tour now for 23 years, so I know most of the guys very well. Those I didn't know – Victor Dubuisson, for example – I made my business to get to know. I spent a week with Victor in Malaysia and had dinner with him every night. I traveled to Monaco when he was down there and had dinner and a bottle of wine with him. I just got to know him socially.

We very rarely talked about golf, but I need to have my own psychological analysis of each player. The statistics guys will tell me the distance he hits the ball, how many greens he hits, *how* he

hits the ball – I know all that. It's the personal stuff I need to establish. What makes him tick as an individual. How much information can I feed to him.

When it came to the event itself, I was very clear that my vice-captains were to speak on message. It was important that we all agreed what was going to be said to the players. In team meetings, it was very much my voice. The vice-captains were there observing, and if they had something to say they would say it to me after the meetings. I didn't want the players hearing too many voices or ideas at the same time. Simplicity and clarity of purpose were very important.

The key thing I said to the players on the very first day was that we are going to win this Ryder Cup with 12 players. Not eight, not three or four, not because we have Rory McIlroy on our team. We are going to win it with 12 – that is our strength. We didn't necessarily have to put our best eight players out on the first morning – we were going to win it with 12 players.

PAUL MCGINLEY

Paul McGinley captained Team Europe to victory over the US in the 40th Ryder Cup at Gleneagles, Scotland in September 2014. He played in three consecutive successful Ryder Cup Teams from 2002, the year he holed the winning putt, and was vice-captain for Europe's 2012 and 2010 victories.

After a broken kneecap ended his dream of a career in Gaelic football, McGinley qualified as a golf professional in 1991. He won four European Tour titles as well as the World Cup, and captained Great Britain and Ireland to victory over Continental Europe in the Vivendi Seve Trophy in 2009 and 2011.

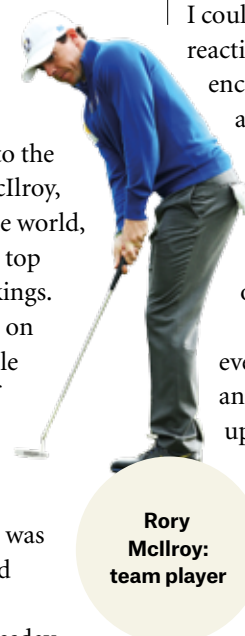
McGinley continues to help shape the PGA European Tour as a member of the Tournament Committee and speaks to senior business leaders about leadership, motivation and teamwork.

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Rory McIlroy:
team player