



MAKING AN IMPACT: Tiger Woods's presence makes all the difference for a tournament in these tough economic times. DAVID CANNON/GETTY IMAGES

Tiger's Return Much Needed While Economy Worsens

Presence has a binary effect on success of event

LOS ANGELES (Reuters)—With his extraordinary gift for near-perfect timing, Tiger Woods announced his return to the winner's circle with a sensational victory at the Arnold Palmer Invitational in Orlando last Sunday.

In only his third tournament back since reconstructive knee surgery, the world number one overhauled a five-stroke deficit to triumph by a shot, giving golf and sports in general a much-needed boost.

Woods's eight-month absence dealt golf a major blow, especially at a time when the global financial crisis had begun to take a firm hold.

He shut down his 2008 campaign immediately after winning the U.S. Open in June and a Tiger-less golf world automatically led to plunging television ratings.

For many people, Tiger Woods is golf and he has almost single-handedly ushered in an era of multimillion-dollar endorsements and lucrative appearance money since turning professional in 1996.

His African-American-Asian background has spread the sport to an audience far beyond its tra-

ditional image of male, white, and middle-class, and he has become the world's best known and most marketable athlete.

Golf, in his absence, began to resemble the fairytale ball without Cinderella and his long-awaited return at last month's WGC-Accenture Match Play Championship was celebrated by the PGA Tour with huge relief and joy.

Vintage Fashion

Just two events later, Woods clinched his 66th Tour title in vintage fashion by holing a 16-foot birdie putt at the last hole and all eyes will be on the game's leading player when he bids for a fifth green jacket at next month's Masters.

"We need him back and we're all excited to have him back," said world number two Phil Mickelson, a double winner on the 2008 PGA Tour. "It's evident the game needs him."

"The economy has been struggling, the sponsors have been struggling, and to have him back is so critical for the sport."

However, the return of an in-form Tiger does not mean all is now well within the golfing world.

Because of the deteriorating global economic landscape, the PGA Tour faces an uncertain future with turmoil in the auto and financial services sectors leaving the sport vulnerable to the loss of marketing and advertising dollars.

Eleven of the Tour's title sponsors come from the financial sector and many of these contracts are up for renewal after the 2010 season.

Robert Boland, professor of sports management at New York University, told Reuters: "I almost think it will become a two-tier golf tour—the tournaments Tiger plays and sponsorship on them and then the events Tiger doesn't play."

"He's the world's most recognizable athlete and the most important person in that regard ... but in a global recession even his power is reduced."

Tiger's Impact

Yet golf clearly benefits with the return of the 14-time major champion and Boland got a taste of Tiger's impact while dining in a restaurant last Sunday evening.

"Dozens of people were surrounding a television there in the bar," he said. "I thought they were

looking at basketball but no, they were looking at Tiger winning a tournament whose name I can't even remember. That's significant."

"The tour last year got a taste of life without Tiger and they didn't like it very much. This is an era where sponsors are pulling out."

"To have the most recognized personality back on top of the leaderboard for a number of rounds is connecting those sponsors to a broader public via television and puts the winds back in the sales of sponsors who are doing golf tournaments."

There are some, though, for whom Woods has become bigger than the game itself, and this they deplore. His detractors bemoan the plethora of Tiger headlines in newspapers whenever he tees it up in a tournament, regardless of how he plays.

With Woods competing, the media gather like moths around a candle flame. In contrast, a tournament without Woods is almost viewed as a non-event.

No one can argue, however, that when Woods wins titles in Tiger-like style, producing moments of magic almost on demand when they matter most, he provides golf theater beyond the reach of his rivals.

Valentine Fears Exodus of Japanese Baseball Players

Former Mets manager discusses lack of incentives in Japan

TOKYO (Reuters)—Japan's World Baseball Classic (WBC) triumph could trigger a further exodus of the country's top talent, former New York Mets coach Bobby Valentine told Reuters.

Currently in charge of Japan's Chiba Lotte Marines, Valentine on Monday warned owners of Japanese teams they needed to step to the plate and offer players more incentive to stay.

"I do fear more players leaving," Valentine said in a telephone interview. "Many players have come to the conclusion there is not the commitment from the league."

Seattle Mariners outfielder Ichiro Suzuki drove in the winning runs to give Japan a 5-3 extra-innings victory over Olympic champions South Korea in the WBC final in late March.

Boston Red Sox pitcher Daisuke Matsuzaka was named the tournament MVP for a second time as Japan retained the title they won at the inaugural competition in 2006.

"It was a storybook ending," said Valentine. "But Ichiro, Matsuzaka and [New York Yankees slugger Hideki] Matsui all left Japanese baseball to make a point."

"The others who followed left to make more money. If you can make twice as much money at the end of your career and you see it is stagnant here, of course you go."

"If they made this league a major league with all the benefits and working conditions and marketing and promotion, there would be

enough revenue generated for players to stay."

More than 30 Japanese players have made the switch to Major League Baseball (MLB) and interest in the domestic game has waned as a result.

Added Obstacles

Valentine, who led the Marines to the Japan Series title in 2005, urged the owners of Japan's 12 ball clubs to make the league more attractive before the floodgates open.

"I don't think any player wants to have to speak another language, eat different food, or waste time with added obstacles unless specifically rewarded for it," he said.

"To say you've played MLB is something for your resume to show your grandchildren. Japan needs to create a system that if not replicating at least competes with the system there."

Valentine has been critical of the Japanese posting system under which Boston paid the Seibu Lions more than \$50 million for the right to negotiate with Matsuzaka.

Pitchers Yu Darvish and Hisashi Iwakuma were just two Japanese players who impressed at the WBC and Valentine said more defections to the majors were possible.

The 58-year-old insisted, however, that Japanese owners should not use the global economic downturn as an excuse for failing to hang on to the country's best talent.

"I don't think the league has to dig deep," said Valentine. "They just need to share. They need to get together and they need to forget about going backwards."

"If you're going to compete you've got to brighten the lights in the office."



HENRY KISSINGER: Soccer fan NICHOLAS KAMMA/AFIP/GETTY IMAGES

Kissinger Recruited for U.S. World Cup Bid

NEW YORK (Reuters)—Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, architect of President Richard Nixon's detente with China, faced a new diplomatic challenge on Monday—helping craft a U.S. bid to host the soccer World Cup.

"I obviously want the World Cup to come here," the Nobel Peace Prize-winner and soccer fan told reporters at a briefing to announce his involvement with the U.S. soccer federation's bid for the 2018 or 2022 tournament.

"I don't think we have a huge chance in 2018, it will probably go to Europe, but you can't tell. We have a good chance for 2022," added Kissinger.

"I'll be 99 years old [in 2022], so it's sort of an obligation to stay around."

Next year's World Cup finals will be played in South Africa and Brazil has been awarded the 2014 tournament.

Apart from the U.S., other formal expressions of interest in bidding for 2018 or 2022 have come from England, Australia, Japan, Qatar, Mexico, Russia, Indonesia, and South Korea. There are also joint proposals from Belgium and Netherlands and Spain and Portugal.

Kissinger was recruited by U.S. Soccer to join the USA Bid Committee to present world soccer's governing body FIFA with proposals to stage a second World Cup in the United States. The 1994 tournament was held in America.

"I was on the board in '94, actively involved, and went to a lot of the

games," Kissinger said. "I've gone to every World Cup except the one in Japan [and South Korea in 2002]."

Enthusiastic Crowds

Asked what he would stress to FIFA in a bid, Kissinger said enthusiastic crowds were one of the key things the U.S. offered.

"In most World Cups, the preliminary games don't have huge attendance. If Yemen plays Egypt, people don't rush to see it, unless it's in one of those countries," he said.

"[In 1994] we were sold out at practically every game."

"Noting that the U.S. reached the quarterfinals of the 2002 World Cup, the former diplomat said the standard of the game in the U.S. was getting better."

"I'd like it to become a major sport. But it's tough finding a time as there's always some other sport overlapping with Major League Soccer," he said.

"But it's progressing. We had bad luck because when the World Cup was here, the final was nothing—nothing," he said of the 1994 final won by Brazil in a penalty shootout over Italy after a goalless draw.

"Americans don't appreciate the finer points of defensive soccer," he said. "The American public wants more scoring."

German-born Kissinger said he followed the fortunes of second division club SpVgg Greuther Fuerth, in his Bavarian hometown, as well as Juventus in Italy's Serie A, and both Manchester United and Arsenal in the English Premier League.

ALMS Invites IMSA GT3 Cup Cars

By JAMES FISH
Epoch Times Staff

The American Le Mans Series (ALMS) will allow International Motor Sports Association (IMSA) GT3 Cup teams to participate in five ALMS races this season, giving up-and-coming sports car drivers a chance to experience a higher level of competition.

ALMS is creating the "Challenge Class" for GT3 Cup cars and drivers, using almost the same technical specifications as the Patrón GT3 Challenge by Yokohama, where these cars usually race.

The Challenge Class will give GT3 Cup drivers endurance racing experience in the most advanced sports car series in North America.

"When the International Motor Sports Association launched the GT3 Cup Series a few years ago, one of the primary goals was to develop future American Le Mans Series talent, and with this announcement today we take a big step forward in fulfillment of that goal," said Series President and CEO Scott Atherton last Friday in an ALMS press release.

"We believe this is a bold and innovative way to encourage the next generation of entrants for the classes that are eligible for Le Mans, as well as for the teams involved in our development series."

Because there are almost no mechanical changes, GT3 teams will



NEW COMPETITOR: GT3 Cup cars like the SAMAX Porsche will be eligible to compete in five ALMS races this season. GAVIN LAWRENCE/GETTY IMAGES

be able to afford the extra races. Not only will the drivers and teams gain racing experience, the teams' sponsors will gain added exposure. The cars will race on Yokohama tires identical to those used in GT3 Cup races.

"By keeping the technical regulations consistent with our Challenge series, we will be able to keep the cost extremely reasonable, consistent with our desire to introduce a new generation of entrants for the Series," said Tim Mayer, Chief Operating Officer of IMSA and the

ALMS.

The Patrón GT3 Challenge has been one of the fastest-growing series since its inception in 2005—it regularly attracts 30 drivers per race. The series features a mix of professional and highly skilled amateur drivers. GT3 Cup races are only 30 minutes long, while the ALMS races will be about three hours long.

IMSA will decide which GT3 Cup drivers will be eligible for the Challenge Series, choosing the most skilled and most talented drivers

from teams that have raced successfully in GT3 for at least a year.

"The American Le Mans Series Challenge Class creates a platform for qualified drivers to transition from Sprint racing to Endurance racing in a cost-effective manner," said Paul Ritchie, President and CEO of Porsche Motorsport North America.

"It will allow the teams to build experience and resources before moving up within the classes of the Series. Porsche Motorsport North America is obviously excited to see more Porsches in the entry lists and will be there to fully support the teams with Parts and Electronic services as we do in all other series."

With Porsche pulling its LMP2 team out of ALMS this year, the Challenge Cup offers Porsche a cost-effective way to gain exposure in ALMS. At the same time, the Challenge Class increases the number of cars on ALMS grids, providing fans with more exciting racing.

"The Challenge Class is a good idea not only for the American Le Mans Series and IMSA, but for Yokohama and the drivers as well," said Mark Chung, Yokohama's Director of Strategic Marketing on the Web site www.americanlemons.com. "It means increased exposure, and it will be an excellent opportunity for our new eco-friendly race tire."