

The Ryder Cup's Real Battle

by Robert Thompson

While 2009 may seem far off to some, to organizers of the prestigious – and lucrative – Ryder Cup challenge, it's just around the corner. And the real issue is 'whose corner?'

While the summer's hottest golfing event this side of Tiger will be the Ryder Cup, the battle between the



European and American teams may not be the most hotly contested fight.

What's being fought over more fiercely than the Cup itself? Well, that's easy – it is the tangle over where the 2009 Ryder Cup will touch down. And surprisingly, a well-known high-tech billionaire has waded into the fray, offering a stiff challenge for a country that never initially seemed to be in the running.

The biannual Ryder Cup, which features team and individual play between the best in Europe and the U.S., has grown tremendously from its seemingly humble beginnings.

The 1999 event, held at The Country Club outside Boston, Mass., was an enormous financial success, raising more than US\$63 million through ticket and concession sales.

Though the event is prestigious and many players battle tooth and nail to get into the tournament, they actually play for free, with the proceeds going to the host country's professional golfers association.

During the planning for the 1999 event, players like David Duval and Masters and British Open champion Mark O'Meara discussed the notion that players should get a cut. They backed away from that idea, however, once the PGA said a portion of the proceeds would head to charities chosen by the players.

But golfers' charitable causes aren't the only ones to benefit from the Ryder Cup. The local economy for the last Ryder event received an estimated US\$150 million boost from the more than 30,000 fans that attended the event daily. And the prestige of the event usually puts the course and area on the tourist map for years afterwards.

Because the event switches between Europe and the U.S. every other year, the European PGA Tour and the British PGA are currently looking for a host for the 2009 event.

Wales, you say?

Perhaps surprisingly, the leader at this point may just be little-known Newport, Wales, which has been drawing headlines in the U.K. over its attempt to get the Ryder Cup.

Wales, you say? It doesn't immediately spring to mind as the center of European golf. Scotland has the history,

while England has a substantial population base and the great courses to boot.

In fact Wales wasn't even on the radar in early discussions for the event. Most assumed Scotland, which last hosted the

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Ryder Cup at Muirfield in 1973, would be a shoo-in to be awarded the tournament. The Scottish golfing elite was pretty sure that no other area of the U.K. could match their courses and facilities, which have been host to numerous British Opens.

Then along came Terry Matthews. The Welsh technology billionaire, who founded Ottawa, Canada-based Newbridge Networks, and ran the company before its takeover by French giant Alcatel Systems SA, has been gunning to bring the Ryder Cup to the place of his birth.

Although Matthews is a resident of Canada, he has extensive properties in Wales, including the stunning Celtic Manor, which features the Robert Trent Jones-designed Wentwood Hills. It is already host to a European PGA Tour event and Matthews would like to add the premier team event to its roster.

The battle isn't cheap. Matthews and a coalition have put £50 million into the bid.

“I’m spending millions over there,” Matthews told me earlier this year. “And we’re going to bring the Ryder

Cup to Wales.”

Matthews is a strange golf enthusiast – he admits he doesn't play very often, though he owns several courses. It takes too much time, he says.

While he may not be the best golfer in the world, he is one of the best businessmen in the high-tech sector. And he's used those abilities to put together a top-notch Welsh offer.

In order to accommodate thousands of spectators, 5,000 three-star hotel rooms have to be available. Wales has 3,000 already committed and has declarations of support for another 3,000. So the course and the facilities are ready.

Great expectations

Many expected the site location to already be picked, but the impressive Welsh bid has held that up. Sources close to the event have even said the package presented by Wales has forced the tournament's organizers to reassess the Scottish site.

So what's the significance of determining the location of an event that won't occur for another eight years? Well, it shows the popularity of golf, which has become a truly international sport, and also demonstrates the impact that one event can have on a country. If Wales gets the 2009 Ryder Cup, the country will be viewed in a different light. Tourists will come and visit its 160 courses. The media will descend on a country that isn't regularly noticed by the rest of the world. And the coffers will open and money will flow. And that's a powerful thing indeed. ▲

Robert Thompson is a columnist with PGATour.com, the official website of the PGA Tour.