

US Ryder Cup Team Finalized

Written by {ga=swerb}

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Captain Tom Lehman finished off his US Ryder Cup team with the announcement of captain's selections Stewart Cink and Scott Verplank (pictured). The two veterans join an otherwise inexperienced US Ryder Cup squad that many are calling the weakest in recent history. I've got my analysis on the team, and the United States prospects for the '06 Ryder Cup, which commences on September 22nd from The K Club in Dublin, Ireland.



Losers of four of the last five Ryder Cups, including an embarrassing 18 1/2 - 9 1/2 beating two years ago at Oakland Hills, the United States has it's work cut out for itself once again this year.

Were it not for the memorable and improbable Sunday comeback at Brookline in 1999, the USA would be riding a thirteen year drought in Ryder Cup play. And they will enter this year's event as decided underdogs, a position the Americans are unaccustomed to despite being dominated badly in this event over the course of the last twenty years.

American captain Tom Lehman leads a squad that many are calling the weakest in recent history for the Americans. Solid at the top with names like Woods, Mickelson, Furyk, DiMarco, Campbell, and Toms ... the guys that finished in the 7-10 spots in the rankings are all players with no Ryder Cup experience, and all guys that stumbled to the finish line. As many as fifteen players had an opportunity to sneak into the top ten and secure a berth on the team during this weekend's PGA Championship, and just about every one of them either missed the cut, or fell apart on the weekend.

As a result, the players who occupied those final four spots heading into the PGA all held on to them. Vaughn Taylor, J.J. Henry, Zach Johnson, and Brett Wetterich will all be making their Ryder Cup debuts. The quartet benefitted greatly from a change to the points system that establishes the US team, which emphasizes current year play more heavily than the previous system that placed more emphasis on the last two years. All four players played well earlier this year, but none of them are at the top of their games right now. And were captain Lehman allowed to simply select twelve players for the team, none likely would have been picked, save possibly Johnson.

Due to the inexperience of the aforementioned players in international team play formats, Tom Lehman rounded out his squad this morning with two veterans, selecting Stewart Cink and Scott Verplank as his captain's selections. Cink is playing well after a rocky start to the season, and is one of the few Americans at the top of his game right now. The selection of Cink was an easy

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one. He's posted three top tens in the last six weeks, and has a 7-7-1 career record in four Ryder/President's Cup appearances over the last five years. The selection of Verplank was a mild surprise. Steve Stricker, Tim Herron, and Jerry Kelly are playing better right now. Davis Love III, Fred Couples, and Corey Pavin have more experience. And guys like Lucas Glover and Aaron Oberholser have more talent. But none are as accurate, or as steady with the putter as Verplank, who was passed over in 2004, and went 4-3-1 in a 2002 Ryder Cup and 2005 Presidents Cup appearance.

On paper, this is not a strong or experienced American team. However, the Americans have been talented and experienced over the last twenty years, and it has led to nothing but disappointment. I love Tom Lehman as a captain, and the way things have gone ... I feel this may be the year the USA rises to the occasion, as no one will be expecting them to win this year.

Here's a quick breakdown of the complete twelve man USA Ryder Cup roster, listed in order of strength in my view:

Tiger Woods - Hands down, the best player in the world, but only boasts a career record of 17-20-3 in international play. It's interesting to note that he is 5-2-1 in singles play, but a brutal 12-18-2 in partner play. His struggle to find a suitable playing partner may have been solved in the President's Cup last year, where he played very well with Jim Furyk, his likely Friday and Saturday partner this year.

Phil Mickelson - Just hasn't been quite the same since his epic meltdown at The U.S. Open this year, but still a formidable talent, and the world's second best player. Struggled badly at the '03 Presidents Cup, going 0-5, and also in the '04 Ryder Cup when paired with Tiger. Partnered with Chris DiMarco, Phil came back strong in the '05 Presidents Cup, going 3-1, and he will likely play with DiMarco again in this year's event.

Jim Furyk - Back at the top of his game after recovering from wrist surgery a couple years ago. A member of the last five Ryder Cup teams, Furyk has gone just 4-9-2 over that stretch. Furyk has nine top tens this year, competed in every major, and will be leaned on heavily by Tom Lehman to be one of the anchors of this squad.

Chris DiMarco - The hero of the 2005 Presidents Cup, and playing incredibly well right now. DiMarco has been the most consistently solid American in the Cup events, going 8-4-2 over the last three years. DiMarco is a gritty and emotional competitor that has evolved into one of the leaders on the US squads, and whose emotions the other players feed off of.

David Toms - Toms gave Tom Lehman and all US Ryder Cup fans indigestion when he withdrew from the British Open with a back injury. Toms has played pretty well upon his return, and Lehman will need Toms if he wants to end the Americans drought this year in Ireland. Is 6-10-1 in the Cup events over the last four years. Has played with primarily Mickelson and Love III in the past, but will likely team with one of the young guys in this go around.

Chad Campbell - Started off the season on fire, but has waffled as of late. In the '04 Ryder

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Cup, Campbell played poorly on Friday and Saturday before rebounding for a meaningless singles rout of Luke Donald on Sunday. Campbell is a very talented player, but is still shaky when the pressure mounts. A Campbell-Verplank pairing makes sense to me for the first two days of play this year.

Stewart Cink - Had an incredible year in 2004, before struggling last year and early this year. Has picked it back up as of late, and will be counted on more heavily than any of the automatic selections listed below. A strong putter, Cink has posted three top tens in the last six weeks, and was one of the few Americans to play decently in the PGA Championship. Expect Cink to play all three days, ahead of guys like Taylor, Wetterich, and Henry. We need ya Stew.

Scott Verplank - Steady as she goes, Verplank was Lehman's second captains pick. Like Cink, he will be counted on heavily due to the inexperienced nature of the US team this year. Accurate off the tee and solid with the flat stick, Verplank went 4-3-1 as a member of the 2002 Ryder and 2005 Presidents Cup teams.

Zach Johnson - Johnson has improved steadily since graduating from the Nationwide Tour in 2004, and has posted four top tens this year ... including a third place finish at the World Match Play Championship. Johnson is the only member for the 7-10 slots deserving of a spot on the team in my view, and is a big wild card for this squad. Johnson paired with Cink, representing the USA at the the World Golf Championships Match Play event this year, and seems a likely Friday/Saturday partner for Cink in the Ryder Cup as well.

Vaughn Taylor - Got off to a torrid start to the season, then faded before coming in fourth at the Buick three weeks ago to climb back up the standings. Taylor has no international match play experience, is 30 years of age, and is not long off the tee at just 150 pounds. He is a very good putter, ranking 12th in putting on tour this year.

Brett Wetterich - Like Taylor, Wetterich had a great start to the season (including second at the Memorial), but has not competed as of late. Unlike Taylor, he absolutely bombs the ball off the tee, and is one of the longest hitters on tour, also ranking amongst the total birdie leaders. If on his game, Wetterich could be an X-Factor for the Americans despite no international match play experience.

J.J. Henry - Henry vaulted up the standings with his win at the Buick Championship, but has not done too much else this season, posting just two other top tens. Henry is one of the best iron players on tour, but has a shaky putter, which is often a recipe for disaster when facing the immense pressure of The Ryder Cup.