

Buick Invitational at Torrey Pines provides a rare public dress rehearsal for the U.S. Open

by Tod Leonard

It figured to be an incredibly popular place for a weekend pro-am. The South Course at Torrey Pines, reduced to a bit player's role for the 2008 Buick Invitational?

That was the plan when the U.S. Golf Association, Friends of Torrey Pines and city of San Diego forged the deal that would bring the 2008 U.S. Open to San Diego.

On the 19th page of a 38-page lease agreement signed in 2002, it was stipulated that "the final two competitive rounds of a professional golf tournament should not occur on the Championship Course during the period from January 1, 2008 through the start of the (U.S. Open) Championship."

It was the sentiment of the USGA that because Torrey Pines is seen every year by millions on TV, it might make the 108th U.S. Open more special if Torrey South didn't get quite as much exposure less than five months before it was to host its first major championship.

Serve 'em up a nice appetizer, then wow 'em with the filet mignon.

A reasonable idea, probably, but it didn't work out.

There was a citizen golfer uprising in late 2004 that put the brakes on a plan to renovate the North Course, and given the logistical and financial problems the move would have caused the Buick organizers, the USGA backed off the blackout at the request of the PGA Tour, and the South returned to the Buick weekend.

NORTH AND SOUTH COURSES

For the purposes of building dramatic tension, it couldn't have worked out better. When the Buick Invitational begins Thursday, players, fans, media and officials can walk the South Course and truly begin to imagine what the U.S. Open will look and feel like when it commences 140 days from now on the first city-owned course to hold a major.

How will the holes change? How much harder will it play? Will we even recognize the place when it is overtaken by mini-cities and 50,000 people? Can anybody else but Tiger Woods win here?

"This is going to be a great Buick," City Golf Manager Mark Woodward said. "There's an outstanding field this year, and with the condition of the courses and the Open so close, the excitement is just amplified."

This is a rare sneak peak, because major championships have traditionally been contested on private courses, seen by the public about once every generation. In golf's modern era, only two other facilities - Pebble Beach Golf Links and Riviera Country Club in L.A. - have staged majors the same year they hosted official PGA Tour events.

Pebble Beach held the '72, '82, '92 and 2000 U.S. Opens months after what is now the AT&T National Pro-Am. Riviera was the site of the L.A. Open and U.S. Open in '48 - the last time golf's national championship was staged in Southern California - and it hosted the Nissan Open and PGA Championship in 1995.

What we can learn from the results of those tournaments is that rarely has the tour event provided much insight into handicapping the major. The top finishers have varied wildly - unless you're looking for the winner. On three of the six occasions, one man has produced the double.

Riviera acquired the nickname "Hogan's Alley" because Ben Hogan won twice there in '48. In '72, Jack Nicklaus captured the Crosby, and then battled brutal conditions in June to seize the Open. In 2000, Tiger Woods scored 273 over the AT&T's rain-soaked three courses to win on a Monday, then bested himself by one shot in the Open on foggy Pebble and smoked the runners-up by a record 15 shots.

Might a similar Woods whipping be in store at Torrey?

Maybe only Augusta National and St. Andrews rank higher in Woods' comfort zone for major venues. He has won four of six Buick Invitationals he's played on the renovated South Course, and his scoring average on the South is three strokes better than the rest of the Buick field.

With Torrey Pines playing as par 71 in the Open, that puts Woods at 8-under in Buick conditions. How many strokes lost will we have to factor for the USGA setup?

"Tiger's the favorite if we were playing in Palm Springs or San Diego," said San Diego product Charley Hoffman, in his third year on the PGA Tour. "I don't know what the USGA can do to hold him back from winning. It's going to be interesting."

Mike Davis, the man who will determine the Open setup as the USGA's director of rules and competitions, insists he's not specifically trying to put a whammy on Woods.

"Listen, if we made the comment that we couldn't care less who's in the running, to some extent that wouldn't be truthful," Davis said. "That's not to say we're rooting for Tiger Woods to win or do well, but if the world's best misses the cut or doesn't play well, it kind of makes you ask yourself if the course was presented properly.

"We always want to see the world's best do well. Not just Tiger. It makes for a better championship."

Davis says he's thrilled to have what he believes to be a fresh palette at Torrey Pines - and one that should produce a very different painting than those from the Buick Invitational. He will use at least three tee boxes that fans won't see in the Buick, and the course conditions figure to be vastly different.

Foremost will be the firmness of the course. This week, the tour players will get the conditions they always get at Torrey in January - softer fairways and the greens easily showing footprints because they're soggy.

Fast forward to June, when there hasn't been any rain for weeks or months, and the USGA can do anything with the fairways and greens it pleases. The roll in the fairways may somewhat negate what will be the longest course in U.S. Open history (7,643 yards), but the putting speeds, Davis said, will be like nothing the golfers have seen before here.

"They have never had them where they will be for the Open," Davis said. "They've never had them in championship conditions. Not even close to it."

Rich Beem, the 2002 PGA champion, rolled his eyes, smiled and dramatically threw up his hands at the thought of it.

"Oh fantastic!" Beem said. "Let's get those greens as rock-hard as we possibly can, and let's grow the rough up so it looks like that bush (pointing to a knee-high bush). Woo-hoo! Sign me up!"

Around the greens, at holes such as Nos. 3, 4, 7, 14 and 18, Davis plans to have the grass mown tightly so

that wayward shots may trickle either into the sagebrush or water.

Watch the bunker shots in the Buick, too, because the tour gives the players a consistently firm lie. The USGA will bring in new sand and fluff it up.

"God forbid they should get a fried-egg lie," Davis said with a sarcastic chuckle. "We're still of the belief that bunkers should be hazards."

The Open is both revered and feared for its rough, but this is where there might be a twist. Davis said most of the Buick fairways will be at Open-width, but that the first cut of rough might be deeper this week than in June.

"My hope is to really keep the first cut of rough low this year," Davis said.

Phil Mickelson will be happy to hear that.

"Both at Winged Foot (in '06) and Oakmont ('07) the rough ended up being more penal than we would have liked," Davis said. "I saw too many guys not being able to reach the green, regardless of how good the shot was they hit. We want them to lose distance control by taking the spin away, but they should still have a chance to get the ball on the green."

A kinder, gentler USGA?

Some players will believe it when they see it.

"They can make it as hard as they want it," Beem said. "Have you not seen a U.S. Open course? The USGA completely demolishes and makes the golf course completely horrendous."

While that may be a view extremely stated, it reflects the concern many other golfers have.

"It's such a tough course to begin with, let alone to make it even harder with more changes," said Jeff Quinney,

the former U.S. Amateur champion who tied for seventh in last year's Buick. "The ball just doesn't fly anywhere there, and all the time you have the ocean winds. And the greens are never perfect. So scoring is always tough, and to make it tougher, it's going to be a nightmare."

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