

Players say: Show us the money, we'll follow

by Tim Sullivan

You can only follow the money so far before the trail leads under the table. It is here that the Buick Invitational operates at a handicap. It is here, in golf's gray market, that the PGA Tour has a problem.

TREE TO GREEN - A couple of fans make the extra effort to get a prime viewing spot near the 13th green at the Buick Invitational at Torrey Pines. They got a chance to see Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson, but they likely weren't worried that some top European players decided to play in Qatar last week. CNS Photo by Sean M. Haffey. Half a world away and 11 time zones ahead of Tiger Woods' latest trophy presentation at Torrey Pines, Adam Scott carded 11 birdies in a closing-round 61 to claim title to the Qatar Masters.

Though Torrey Pines is the site of the 2008 U.S. Open, and though the Buick Invitational awards more than twice as much prize money as its concurrent European Tour stop, both events succeeded in attracting nine of the world's top 25 players.

Given the \$2.7 million disparity in purses and the major championship to be held here in June, the relative parity of the two tournament fields might seem strange. Yet it begins to add up once you factor in appearance fees, those five-, six- and seven-figure incentives common in other countries but forbidden on the PGA Tour.

"I'm not surprised," Buick Invitational Tournament Director Tom Wilson said Sunday. "These guys set their schedule based on where they think they can do the best for themselves. A lot of the players that went to the Qatar Masters this week got appearance fees. Plus, they got to play for the purse.

"When they get guaranteed X amount of dollars, it's probably better than the check they may or may not make (at the Buick). That makes a difference."

There's a lot to be said for guaranteed money and a lot to be lost when missing the cut nets you nothing. When in doubt, the sure thing sure has a lot going for it. That applies to up-front payments as it does to Tiger Woods with an eight-stroke advantage.

So long as Woods has a title to defend, the Buick should be blessed. Sunday's triumph was Tiger's sixth in the tournament and his fourth in a row, which ought to ensure large crowds and strong ratings for next year's installment. Yet since this appearance also represented Woods' last competitive stop before a 20-hour flight to the Dubai Desert Classic, well, draw your own conclusions.

With the American dollar in steep decline, following the money more often means giving chase to foreign currency. Last year at this time, a Euro was worth roughly 77 cents. Now, it provides \$1.47 in U.S. purchasing power.

In a sport comprised of independent contractors, men who set their own schedules and negotiate individual sponsorships, such a spike does not escape notice. And though the PGA reinforces brand loyalty through the cumulative points programs tied to the FedExCup and the Ryder Cup, players who command substantial appearance fees can easily meet the tour's minimum requirement of 15 tournaments.

Top European Tour players weigh the same kind of considerations, plus appearance fees, plus the logistical issues involved in crossing the Atlantic in search of loot. The European Tour's Middle East swing is a series of short hops. For the European player, Torrey Pines means a mighty long haul. (That wouldn't explain American Scott Verplank's presence in Qatar, but Verplank hasn't played the Buick since 2000.)

"I totally understand," Woods said Sunday of the Qatar contingent. "Some of the guys play the European Tour and those three tournaments right there - Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Dubai - are very close to one another, and guys like to play over there where it's warm. The greens are always perfect, not bumpy poa like out here."

What's harder to reconcile is that in bypassing the bumpy poa, players are neglecting an opportunity to study

the site of an upcoming major. Scott, the 27-year-old Qatar champion, last competed at Torrey Pines as a junior golfer, long before the South Course was revamped for the purpose of pursuing an Open bid.

Defending U.S. Open champion Angel Cabrera and two-time Open champion Ernie Els, both idle this week, have each competed in only one Buick Invitational. Retief Goosen, another two-time Open champion, has yet to compete in the Buick. (Goosen was scheduled to defend his title in Qatar, but withdrew because of eye problems.)

Though Wilson believes this year's Buick field was enhanced by players performing pre-Open due diligence - a "dream field," he called it - he was careful not to overstate its impact. He figures most elite players are able to do their reconnaissance on the fly.

"They can take the three practice rounds that they'll get for the Open and have a good feeling for the golf course," Wilson said. "That old tour saying - 'These guys are good' - there's a lot of truth to that."

Jim Furyk, the 2003 Open champion, played the Buick for the first time since 2001 with an eye to getting a jump on June. He left the premises 21 shots behind Woods and not altogether sure what he had gained.

"I play Pebble (Beach) every year and I know Pebble Beach well, but it's totally different at the U.S. Open," Furyk said. "So all that knowledge you had in the past kind of gets thrown away, can even be hurtful at times. But you pick up a lot more knowledge (by playing)."

Furyk's stated concern is that the number of attractive events now outstrips the amount of time he's prepared to commit to competition. A pretty nice problem, that.

Woods' problem, if he has one, is that there is not enough of him to exploit all of his opportunities. He has no problem with the PGA Tour's ban on appearance fees and, frankly, not much need.

"We play for plenty of money out here," he said.

Woods has become so dominant that it has to be disheartening for his rivals. Perhaps they should offer him a disappearance fee.

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