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Tavistock returns to roots

LAKE NONA WILL HOST THE EXCLUSIVE EVENT FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE ITS INCEPTION.

In the months before the first Tavistock Cup became reality in 2004, there was a breakfast within the walls of Lake Nona Golf and Country Club. Ernie Els was there, as was a young pro, Trevor Immelman, and Christopher Anand, an executive with the Tavistock Group, which owns Lake Nona and Isleworth Country Club.

Anand brought up the familiar debate: If a club championship were held between the best golfers at Lake Nona and the best at Isleworth, which team would win? And even better, Anand went on, what if the Tavistock Group could stage a two-day event to settle the hypothetical argument?

Els was in.

So was Immelman.

Lake Nona's Retief Goosen and Sergio Garcia joined later. As did Isleworth's Mark O'Meara.

"And so that's how the event was born," Anand said. "And the first year, Tiger [Woods] didn't play, but it was still a phenomenal event. We pulled it together in like, three months, which is probably a world record for a golf tournament."

Monday morning, after two years at Isleworth, the fourth Tavistock Cup -- which will feature 11 of the top 30 golfers in the world rankings, Woods included -- is returning to its Lake Nona roots. The helicopters that will bring team Isleworth across town are scheduled to touch down in the fairway of hole No. 18 at 9:15.

The event is known as much for its exclusivity -- tickets are limited to thousands and aren't available to the public -- as it is for the great competition. But after four years, does the Tavistock Cup still have the same allure it did when it was a novelty?

"Does it have legs?" asked Doug McMahon, managing director of the Tavistock Group.

"We did this event the first year because the players wanted to do it. And we've done it every subsequent year because the players wanted to do it."

"It truly can continue as long as the players think it would be fun to vie for their country club championship."

The Tavistock Group tries to make sure the players' experience is one of a kind. Thus, the helicopters. During the tournament's first year, lining them up proved most challenging.

"The last thing we want to be is complacent," said Andy Odenbach, vice president of sports ventures for the Tavistock Group. Odenbach, who's serving as the tournament director for the Tavistock Cup, is himself a symbol of how far the event has come.

A few years ago, he was one of the youngest tournament directors on the PGA Tour, already with a Ryder Cup and two PGA Championships to his credit. Then the people at Tavistock came calling.

The Tavistock Cup's purse has more than doubled since the original in 2004, from \$1.5 million then to \$3.5 million now, which includes \$1 million to be split by the 10 members of the winning team and donated to charity. There's also plenty of bonus money and prizes at stake.

These days, the Tavistock Cup fancies itself as the Ryder Cup of club championships. Instead of the fierce competition typical of the Ryder Cup, though, the Tavistock serves as a place for old friends to reunite, for players' families to catch up.

"It's just a fun, friendly competition," said Isleworth's Scott Hoch, who will return to the competition after missing the '06 Cup with a wrist injury. "I don't think it's so much about bragging rights."

This year is the first of a new three-year contract that ensures the Tavistock Cup will last until at least 2009 and that the debate of which world-class club is the best will be settled for next few years.

"[The helicopters were] the hardest thing for us to figure out," Anand said. "Just because we needed matching helicopters; we didn't have a ton of time to find them; they needed to be of a certain quality."

"It was such a nightmare."

The helicopters have come to represent what the Tavistock Cup is all about: over-the-top indulgence for an over-the-top club championship, staged in front of an elite audience with some of the deepest pockets around.

In some respects, it has become easier for organizers over the years. In others, it has become more difficult. Status quo is the enemy.



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