US victory in Ryder Cup meets with chauvinist outburst in Britain

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The US victory in golf's Ryder Cup challenge brought in its wake widespread criticism in the European press and a torrent of anti-American vitriol in the British media.

Anger amongst members of the European team at the behaviour of the US players and supporters was echoed throughout Europe's newspapers. In the main, press reaction was to assume the moral high ground against the unsportsmanlike conduct and unseemly patriotism of the Americans.

But in Britain this was magnified into a collective cry of indignation, even hatred. The *Daily Mirror* called the US players and their supporters the "United Slobs of America". "Joy of Ugly Victory Brings Out the Ugly American", headlined the *Guardian*. "American players and their fans belong in the gutter", wrote the *Sun*.

The *Mirror* commented that "Sporting relations between the two nations" were at "an all-time low". But this was not enough for some newspapers, which wished to generalise their hostility to cover all Americans.

"Let us be painfully honest about it," wrote columnist Matthew Norman in the *London Evening Standard*, "yes, they are repulsive people, charmless, rude, cocky, mercenary, humourless, ugly, full of nauseatingly fake religiosity, and as odious in victory as they are unsporting in defeat." The *Daily Mail* drew the conclusion: "Rednecks show it may be time to start trading punches, not pleasantries".

The immediate occasion for this invective was an incident on the 17th green in Brookline, Massachusetts. Justin Leonard birdied a 45-foot putt that secured the US a narrow 14-1/2 to 13-1/2 win, after the Americans trailed earlier in the contest. Before the Spanish golfer Jose Maria Olazabal was able to take a 25-foot putt that could have kept Europe's Ryder Cup hopes alive, American players, their wives, girlfriends, caddies and spectators surrounded Leonard on the green, jumping and cheering. Olazabal had to wait for the green to clear and then missed the shot.

Europe's vice-captain Sam Torrance called the celebrations "the most disgusting thing I've ever seen". Olazabal said it was “an ugly picture to see”. Scotland's Colin Montgomerie said, "I couldn't believe after the scene that Jose still had a putt to halve".

The US team captain Ben Crenshaw apologised for the events, but this was not the first time tensions had been raised. Earlier, US Open champion Payne Stewart denounced the unruly behaviour of some American fans for their abuse of Colin Montgomerie, a Scottish member of the European team. Montgomerie complained that his father had left the course because he was so upset.

A fan had also shouted at the top of Olazabal's backswing and spectators sent rookie Andrew Coltart in the wrong direction to hunt for a lost ball. European Captain Mark James said he had no desire to take part in another Ryder Cup contest on American soil after his wife was spat at on the final day.

How is one to account for such overt antagonisms being expressed in the normally sedate world of golf? It is certainly the case that more was at stake than mere prestige in winning the Ryder Cup tournament. A recent list of money winners in the US PGA Tour cites Tiger Woods having secured $4,266,585. Even number 20, Tom Lehman, has won a cool $1,288,239.

Cash prizes are not directly at stake in the Ryder Cup, but sponsorship is far more lucrative than prize money and victory counts when players are seeking to secure endorsement contracts. Woods, for example, recently restructured his contract with Nike to more than double its current value, paying him between $80 million and

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$90 million in the next five years. The Spaniard Sergio Garcia is being touted as an up-and-coming challenger for Woods' crown.

Victory in the high-profile Ryder Cup is crucial. Though Will Mann, president of the PGA of America, said the contest was "devoid of commercialism", elsewhere it was described as the biggest cash cow in the history of American sport. The tournament, with its 59 corporate tents, made as much as $70 million. It is estimated that visitors to the Boston area spent in the area of $150 million and there was $2 million per day from merchandise sales, on top of the $8 million advance sales to corporations. Men's polo shirts averaged $70 dollars each and were sold at a rate of 400 an hour.

But the commercial stakes cannot fully account for the hostility witnessed at Brookline amongst players and spectators. Nor do they explain the hysterical reaction in the British media and, to a lesser extent, in other European countries.

The reaction of the European media, above all that of Britain, to the Ryder Cup is a reflection of the increasingly poisoned relations between the US and Europe, and the core issues have nothing to do with golf. Particularly in the aftermath of the Kosovo War, the European ruling classes are acutely aware of the dangers to their own geopolitical interests in Europe and beyond posed by the overwhelming military supremacy of the US, and Washington's readiness to use its military advantage to aggressively expand its economic and political influence around the world.

Long-standing conflicts over trade, monetary policy, relations with Russia and Eastern Europe, the struggle for spheres of influence in Africa and Asia, and other issues have become invested with enormous venom. That this is particularly the case in Britain—where official political opinion hails a supposed "special relationship" between the two countries, but where the ruling elite rails privately against its subordinate position—is indicative of how deeply antagonisms now run.

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