

Watson no contest for clinical McGinley

The Daily Telegraph,
9/29/2014

Alasdair Reid

at Gleneagles



Europe's captain wins tactical battle as American great struggles to connect with his team of youngsters

"I have somewhat of an affinity for Scotland," Tom Watson said when he arrived at Gleneagles last week. Would that he had the somewhat of an affinity for the basic principles of leadership, as Phil Mickelson pointed out with such exquisite malice. The blame for the United States' defeat cannot be laid entirely at Watson's door, but there is little doubt that he lost the captaincy battle as comprehensively as his players lost their matches.

But then, that has been the pattern of the Ryder Cup in recent times, with the exception of Paul Azinger's victory in 2008. While the Europeans have won eight of the past 10 events, their captains have emerged as individuals of stature, insight and solid good sense.

The American leaders have mostly been worthy old coves, but their grasp of management techniques has been non-existent. They have relied on their reputations – and found that reputations mean nothing in this environment.

Staggeringly, every US captain since 1927 has been a major champion. A number of Europeans have had that status, too, but having your name on one of those four trophies is clearly no guarantee that you have a talent for man management as well.

Indeed, as in football, where players from the second rank generally make better managers than the top stars, it could be suggested that coming up just short of greatness bestows a deeper understanding of the importance of application and effort.

Paul McGinley had that. The European captain was never going to dazzle his players by reeling off his achievements, but he made it his business to cover every base and consider every possibility to allow them to shine on their own account.

The Irishman was forensic, clinical, meticulous in his preparations. The so-called "European template" never had any physical form, but McGinley filled

his own notebooks as he served his 12-year apprenticeship as a three-time Ryder Cup player and a two-time vice-captain. So by the time he took the top job, McGinley knew what creating a winning team and a winning environment was all about.

Amazingly, Watson had not even attended a Ryder Cup since he led the American team in the 1993 matches at The Belfry. In other words, he had no first-hand experience of the tournament it has become over the past 21 years.

There has been a telling contrast in the way the players of both teams have spoken about their captains these past few days.

The Europeans have talked about McGinley's thoroughness, his attentiveness, his attention to detail. They have relayed how he was on their cases all the way through the qualifying process, geeing them along, keeping them in the loop. Invited to assess Watson, the Americans have noted little beyond the fact that he used to be a good golfer.

Watson has conducted himself, as you would expect, with dignity and grace. He took defeat stoically and sportingly. Next July, at St Andrews, he will play his last Open Championship. The adoration of the galleries there will be a better way to remember the affinity with Scotland that he cherishes. But this week he was taught a lesson in five key areas:

1 PREPARATION

McGinley has been a frequent visitor to Gleneagles since his captaincy was confirmed 19 months ago. He made it his business to check out rooms and facilities as well as ensuring the groundstaff knew how he wanted the course to play. Watson has made only two or three visits in the same period, and his attempt to gather his players there in July was a failure as only a few bothered to turn up.

McGinley has also attended a number of tournaments to keep a close eye on candidate players, hosted a number of dinners for those who looked likely to make the team and made it his business to get to know fringe players such as Victor Dubuisson.

2 WILD CARDS

Webb Simpson and Stephen Gallacher made nightmare starts in the Friday fourballs and did not play again until the Sunday singles. Hunter Mahan was the best of the

Picture this...



Paul McGinley's determination to prepare his team as well as possible involved putting inspirational images, including these two, on the wall of the European team-room. Judging by the way they played – and partied – together, they worked a treat.

US wild cards, delivering 1½ points, with Westwood the strongest of the European picks, winning both his foursomes matches in the company of Jamie Donaldson. And Ian Poulter definitely did his bit.

However, while McGinley had few options, most commentators believe that Watson erred by leaving players such as Chris Kirk and Billy Horschel at home.

3 MATCH SELECTIONS

Watson made a bold move when he sent rookies Patrick Reed and Jordan Spieth out together on Friday morning and was rewarded when they took a point off Poulter, the European talisman. Amazingly, however, he then stood them down for the afternoon foursomes.

Watson also made an inexplicable decision to stand down Phil Mickelson and Keegan Bradley on Saturday. His tactics put pressure on other players, and Watson admitted he had erred when he saw how they were tiring.

McGinley's main mistake was to pair the nervous Gallacher with the out of form Poulter on that first day. But his masterstrokes were to bring Graeme McDowell together with Dubuisson and to put Henrik Stenson alongside Justin Rose.

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