



Last Word by Jimmy Roberts of NBC Sports

Seasons of Change

“Tiger Woods has already played on four Ryder Cup teams... every one held since he turned professional in 1996.”

Remember way back in April? Phil Mickelson used *two* drivers to win The Masters. It was certainly one of the biggest stories of the year’s first major, and a huge factor in Mickelson’s ability to drive the ball straight and take advantage of his length. Ironically, two months later at Winged Foot, his misuse of *one* driver was the U.S. Open’s biggest story. That’s how quickly things change in golf. As the 36th Ryder Cup Matches approach – to be played September 22 through 24 on the Arnold Palmer-designed course at The K Club outside of Dublin, Ireland – a conversation I once had with Palmer not long ago reminds me that the way things change in this game is hardly a new story.

As big a deal as anyone is in golf today, Palmer was that big a generation ago. They used to say that men wanted to *be* him... and women wanted to be *with* him. But after he won the U.S. Amateur in 1954 and turned pro shortly thereafter, it would be seven years before Palmer played on his first Ryder Cup team. It wasn’t that Palmer didn’t play well. By the start of the 1961 season, he already won 22 times on Tour, including three majors. But back then, you couldn’t earn Ryder Cup qualifying points until you’d been a professional for five years. Tiger Woods is 30 years old and has already played on four Ryder Cup teams... every one held since he turned professional in 1996. Things have changed.

“It had always been one of my most important goals to play in the Ryder Cup,” said Palmer recently. “I felt very strongly about it, but I just had to accept the fact that I wasn’t eligible. That was the deal back then. I’ll tell you what though, when I finally did get to play (in 1961 at Royal Lytham & St. Anne’s), I remember the tears rolling down my cheeks as they played ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’” Palmer went on to play on five more Ryder

Cup teams, amassing a 22-8-2 career record in matches. He also was twice-victorious while serving as Ryder Cup captain in 1963 (playing captain) and 1973.

The “five year rule” wasn’t dropped until 1990, meaning neither Phil nor Tiger have had to sit out a Ryder Cup for which they qualify. But that’s not even close to the most significant way things were different for the Tour pros of Palmer’s generation. For the first six months of their careers, rookie professionals weren’t allowed to accept a dime of prize money in PGA-sanctioned events (this was before the players split to form the PGA Tour). They were in essence, serving an unpaid apprenticeship.

Palmer turned pro in late November 1954 and aside from a \$696 payday for finishing 10th at the 1955 Masters (an independent event), the first check he was allowed to earn was in Fort Wayne almost two months later. Palmer finished 25th and earned \$125. Safe to say that things have changed. Fairfield’s J.J. Henry has won more than three times the career prize money that Arnold Palmer did, despite winning for the first time in Hartford in July (and he’s only \$16,000 behind Jack Nicklaus in career money).

“You have to remember,” said Palmer, “the PGA of America, which was primarily an organization of club professionals, ran what was the Tour back then.” Soon after though, things changed, in large part due to an initiative led by Palmer and Nicklaus.

Thirty years from now, who knows how much the game will have changed and in what ways. Chances are, in retrospect, today’s status quo will seem quaint. It was just 18 years ago that Curtis Strange became the first player to earn a million dollars in prize money for one season on the PGA Tour. Last year, a million dollars would have put you 79th on the money list. Things change in golf in a hurry, but that’s nothing new, is it? ■