

by Jimmy Roberts of NBC Sports



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Captain’s Pick

For goodness sakes, please, somebody help me with the great mysteries of the universe: Other than her family, why does anybody care about Paris Hilton? What is the key to understanding trigonometry? And, as the calendar is about to turn to a Ryder Cup year, how is it possible that Larry Nelson — the man with an absolutely perfect résumé for the job — has never been Ryder Cup captain?

“We’re always looking for ways to inspire our players,” 2002 Ryder Cup captain Curtis Strange told me recently. “Maybe the way to go is to choose someone who’s ‘been there and done that,’ not only the way they play golf, but the way they live their life.”

By any measure, that’s Nelson.

He played in three Ryder Cups and compiled a sterling 9-3-1 record. Among those who’ve played at least five matches in Ryder Cup competition, he has one of the best winning percentages in the American team’s history. He’s also won the PGA Championship — usually the required credential for a Ryder Cup captaincy — twice. You have to go back some 70 years, to Paul Runyan, to find the last time a two-time, American-born PGA champion wasn’t honored with a Ryder Cup captaincy.

“I’m disappointed that I haven’t had the opportunity,” says Nelson. “I was encouraged a couple of times that it might happen and then, well...” his voice trails off. “I’m not really thinking about it too much anymore.”

Which is truly a shame. Every two years, the Ryder Cup seems to be as much about waving the American flag as it is about golf. Forget the golfing credentials, Nelson served in Vietnam. Who could be a more meaningful leader than a man who fought in combat

under that same flag? Agree or disagree with our nation’s politics, but it’s hard not to have enormous respect for a man who’s put his life on the line in service to his country.

“They seem to be stuck on the idea that it (the captain) has to be a current player,” Nelson said recently. “Back around 1995, the order of things was skipped and I kind of missed my turn. Nobody seems to really know why.”

To quote my soon-to-be-teenage son: “whatever!”

Instead of pointing fingers, here’s hoping this new year finds somebody at the PGA of America willing to make a bold move: Break the recent mold and put Nelson in the position he’s earned. He would be 62 at the 2010 matches in Wales, the oldest American captain ever. So what? Jack Nicklaus is 67, and he seems to be doing just fine as the President’s Cup captain. A team benefiting from a captain’s close knowledge of his players is an antiquated notion anyway. Things just aren’t the way they used to be.

“I heard Tiger had to take a couple of his teammates out to dinner last time around because he didn’t even know them,” said Nelson.

There are a million reasons Larry Nelson is the right choice the next time one needs to be made, but least of all there is this: The way things have gone lately for the American team, could it really hurt to shake things up?

My wife tells me I have to let things roll off my back more. So here’s my resolution for the new year: I’m not going to let the trigonometry or Paris Hilton things bother me anymore because, after all, they’re trivial, right? But I don’t know if I’ll be able to do the same thing if somebody doesn’t do the right thing when it comes to Larry Nelson. ■



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