

Conquering Bear Trap key to Honda Classic win

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The PGA Tour wrapped up its West Coast swing and begins the Florida leg of the season this week at the Honda Classic. The host venue is the PGA National Champion Course in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.

Golf Stats: The Numbers That Matter

Since the Honda Classic moved there in 2007, the course has been in the top 10 in scoring difficulty. If recent history holds, we should see very short drives, significantly fewer par breakers than most PGA Tour events and a champion who has won a major or at least can play the shots needed to win golf's biggest tournaments.

In 2008, the PGA National Champion Course was the ninth most difficult on the PGA Tour out of 54, averaging 1.825 strokes above par.

How hard is this track? Take a look at a few of the courses that played more difficult: Royal Birkdale (British Open), Oakland Hills (PGA Championship), Torrey Pines (U.S. Open), Muirfield Village (The Memorial) and TPC Sawgrass (The Players Championship). The main reasons for this company: PGA National is a very challenging layout in terms of driving distance while birdies are tough to come by, even from the fairway. Plus, there are only two par-5s on the course -- the 18th hole being the third most difficult par-5 on tour last year.

2008 Shortest driving distances

Rank	Course	All drives (in yards)
1	Pebble Beach	264.9
2	Harbour Town	265.9
3	Innisbrook	266.4
4	PGA National	266.6
5	Atunyote Golf Club	271.2

2008 lowest birdie or better percentage from the fairway

Rank	Course	All drives (in yards)
1	Innisbrook	14.19
2	TPC Four Seasons	14.92
3	PGA National	16.02
4	Torrey Pines (South)	16.84
5	Atunyote Golf Club	17.12

PGA Tour's toughest par-5s in 2008

Rank	Course	Hole	Yards	Stroke avg.
1	Pebble Beach	14	573	5.296
2	Poppy Hills	4	603	5.228
3	PGA National	18	604	5.096
4	Royal Birkdale	15	544	5.089
5	Muirfield Village	11	567	5.044

As for eagles, you can pretty much forget about them. Last year, there were a total of six eagles for the entire event. This ranked PGA National as the most difficult course to eagle on tour last year, giving up one eagle for every 1,317 holes played. The next closest in 2008 was Torrey Pines' North Course at one eagle every 930 holes.

To put this into better context, players can expect one eagle every 73 rounds at PGA National. This year at the Bob Hope Classic, the Nicklaus Course at PGA West gave up one eagle almost every three rounds.

The 7,158-yard par-70 PGA National course was redesigned by [Jack Nicklaus](#) and features a very difficult closing stretch. Nos. 15-17 has been labeled "The Bear Trap" and were the second-, fifth- and third-most difficult holes last year. Nos. 15 and 17 are par-3s over water, and No. 16 is a 434-yard, par-4 with an approach over water. Add to this difficult stretch some Sunday pressure, seasonal Florida winds and the grain of Bermuda greens, and we could have a very wild finish.



Sam Greenwood/Getty Images

Hole Nos. 15-17 at PGA National have been dubbed "The Bear Trap" and is traditionally one of the toughest closing stretches on the PGA Tour each season.

The field

Though we will probably have to wait just one more week for Tiger's second coming at the WGC-CA Championship at Doral, there are still some headliners at the Honda Classic.

International players highlight the elite field this week. They include: [Sergio Garcia](#) (No. 2 in the world), [Camilo Villegas](#) (9), defending champ [Ernie Els](#) (14) and Northern Ireland's teen sensation [Rory McIlroy](#) (16). The top-ranked U.S. competitors playing this week are [Stewart Cink](#) (18), who is coming off a third-place finish at the WGC-Accenture Match Play, and [Justin Leonard](#) (25), who made it to the round of eight last week before being ousted by England's [Ross Fisher](#). The U.S. brings its own teenage fan favorite back as Hawaiian [Tadd Fujikawa](#) will tee it up.

Winning at PGA National

Last year's champion, Ernie Els, had a great ball-striking week to lead him to victory. He finished T-4 in greens in regulation, ninth in proximity to the hole and 10th in driving distance. After his win, Els summed up the event by saying you have to hit major championship shots all the time to win here.

Expect a long driver with world-class game to be at the top of the leaderboard come Sunday night. Over the past decade, six of the past 10 Honda Classic champs also own a major victory.

As always, GIR is the most important statistical category to predict success, but add a little more weight at PGA National. Expect this year's champ to finish the week in the top 10 in GIR and near the top 25 in driving distance.

Fantasy Foursomes

To make this year's picks, let's use the analysis above, along with some historical context and the hot players on the PGA Tour.

- Camilo Villegas provided a couple of beat-downs last week at the WGC-Match Play, knocking off [Rod Pampling](#), 7 and 6 and Miguel Angel Jimenez, 5 and 4. He lost in the third round to eventual champ [Geoff Ogilvy](#), but the Colombian's performance should not be ignored. He has muscle off the tee and is ranked second in GIR at 76.11 percent.
- Els made the weekend at the WGC-Match Play for this first time since 2001. He made in the neighborhood of 16 birdies and an eagle in the first three rounds; that was after making 17 birdies and an eagle the previous week at Riveria.

Els currently ranks ninth on tour in GIR at 74.07 percent and 24th in driving distance. His kryptonite has been his putter, but he worked with Callaway to create a Ping Anser knock-off -- the putter he used to win the 1994 U.S. Open. Let's see if that can bring back the old magic for the Big Easy; the three-time major champion currently ranks outside the top 100 in most putting categories.

- McIlroy won his first three matches last week before losing to Ogilvy. The eventual champion needed eight birdies and his best round of the tournament to defeat McIlroy 2 and 1.

After the match, Ogilvy paid the teenager high accolades, saying, "He's the real deal. He's got it physically. He's got the whole package. This will be the worst ranking he's got for the next 10 years. It's only going to go up because he's very impressive."

Ogilvy further mentioned his caddie's comments on McIlroy: "If you want to be the second-best player in the world, you got to be better than Rory."

Major champion Mark O'Meara said that Rory is a better ball-striker than [Tiger Woods](#) was at the same age. The kid is legit.

- [Boo Weekley](#) is leading the tour in ball-striking and GIR at 79.17 percent. He finished second here in 2007 and was in the hunt last year before a final-round 80.

- [Mark Calcavecchia](#) is coming off a week of rest and back-to-back top-10 finishes. He has won the Honda Classic twice and been runner-up twice. The 1989 British Open champion was in contention here last year, but a double at the start of the Bear Trap on Sunday and a bogey at No. 18 left him three back and in fourth place.

- [Davis Love III](#) is motivated and goal-oriented this year. He has gone public with his desire to compete again in the majors and to make Fred Couples' Presidents Cup team. With his second-place showing at the Mercedes-Benz and his strong showing at the WGC-Match Play, Love has moved up from 80th to 53rd in the world rankings. He needs to be in the top 50 to qualify for next week's WGC-CA Championship at Doral and for the Masters.

Love, who owns one major title, has made 14 consecutive cuts at the Honda, including two second-place finishes. He currently ranks 15th in GIR at 73.08 percent.

- [Ben Crane](#) is one of the few "C" players hitting more than 70 percent of his greens, and he finished T-12 last year. [Ted Purdy](#) is another "C" player that qualifies, hitting 71.48 percent of his greens and is averaging more than 288 yards off the tee. He has made all five cuts this year and improved every week: T-51, T-35, T-26, T-14 and T-13.

The Starters: Villegas, McIlroy, Calcavecchia and Purdy

Next in Line: Els, Weekley, Love and Crane