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A PANE IN THE GLASS

I'm not a Tiger Woods fan but I do respect his amazing talent and what he has done to elevate the way professional golfers train. His impact has been most positive. That being said, I sometimes actually find myself feeling sorry for him. He has a burden in so many areas to excel at all times and almost at all costs and in most cases the expectations thrust upon him border on "unfair" but such is the life he has chosen. You can't reap the unbelievable rewards without some responsibility.

I think his win in this year's U.S. Open under what must have been excruciatingly difficult physical conditions will go down in sports history as perhaps the most remarkable of victories. That being said, when so many predicted that the "sky would fall" during his rehab from surgery, I had to remind those same naysayers that golf was played for hundreds of years without Tiger and seemed to not only survive but flourish. It will continue during Tiger's absence.

And, as for the U.S. Ryder Cup team that was supposed to lose and lose big time without Tiger, I never bought into that and it appears that Capt. Azinger didn't either. I usually watch the Ryder Cup not pulling for either side. I just like to watch athletes perform under conditions they don't face regularly and observe how they handle them. But, this time I was really hoping the U.S. side would win. I think it will be a real reality check for Tiger to sit at home and watch the U.S., which lost 5 of 6 Ryder Cup's with him, win without him! The Ryder Cup IS a team sport and no one player is ever greater than the sum of the parts. That has been proven time and time again.

I want to thank Keith Scott for pointing out this article from "The Wall Street Journal". Wall Street is not exactly on the top of most Americans all time best liked list amidst the Congressional bail-out but the words of Mr. Newport are well chosen and most appropriate.

I'll make more comments after you have read the article which is also available at the time of writing on the internet at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122246633744980277.html> .

Bill Tschirhart

Team USA's Management Victory

Ryder Cup captain Paul Azinger used a group-dynamic philosophy with lessons for golf and beyond

By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT

(Wall Street Journal)

It's been a few weeks since the Ryder Cup, a dizzying three days of Tiger-less but terrific golf which was all-too-quickly forgotten amid the week's economic craziness and politics. But the inside story of how the American side reversed its slide and kept from folding as a team (the U.S. had lost five of the six previous matches against Europe) has not been told.

The players, particularly the six rookies lead by Anthony Kim, played spectacularly well. But most of the credit for the Americans' surprising 16½ to 11½ pummeling of the European squad rightly goes to the non-playing captain, Paul Azinger. Some Ryder Cup captains take a laissez-faire approach. Jack Nicklaus told me jokingly last week, in an interview posted on WSJ.com that his job as captain was to deliver a few speeches and make sure the players had "fresh towels, sunscreen and tees." Sometimes that's enough.

But against the heavily favored Europeans, Mr. Azinger pulled out all the stops. First, he completely revamped the way the team was chosen. He truncated the period during which players earned most of their points from two years to one, and extended the team-selection deadline until just two weeks before the competition began, in both cases to secure the hottest players. He persuaded the PGA of America, which sponsors the team, to allow him four captain's picks instead of the traditional two.

Most significantly for the Americans' ultimate success, however, he deployed a novel, multifaceted team-building strategy that worked to perfection -- and which might provide an intriguing management model for business.

Sunday night, shortly after the U.S. victory at Valhalla Golf Club in Louisville, Ky., I asked Mr. Azinger to describe the core concept of his plan. "If I tell you, then I can never do a book, right?" he said with a laugh.

This week, however, Mr. Azinger allowed a couple of his closest advisers -- Olin Browne, a PGA Tour player who served as an assistant captain, and Ron Braund, Mr. Azinger's life coach and a corporate team-building specialist -- to share with me some details of his so-called secret strategy.

The most radical element of the plan was dividing the 12-man squad into three, four-man subgroups, or pods. Mr. Azinger apparently got this idea several years ago from a documentary about the military's Special Forces and their Ryder Cup-size platoons. The Navy Seals, for instance, typically operate in 13-man units led by two officers and a chief, and frequently break down into subgroups, depending on the mission.

"Each pod was a force unto itself," Mr. Browne said of last week's team. Pod members played all their practice rounds together and were paired only with other pod members in the competition. Even in the Sunday singles matches, the pods went off sequentially, four by four. Each pod was assigned an assistant captain to tend to players' needs and to keep them relaxed and "on message" -- a key concept in the strategy.

"Working together for the common good is not normally a function for us out on the PGA Tour. We play as individuals," Mr. Browne said. "But the pods allowed the players, without any formal training, to feed off each other

and help each other and to manage all the different things that come up in a pressure-cooker situation like the Ryder Cup. In the larger 12-man group, some guys with quieter personalities might have been lost in the shuffle. Some of the rookies might have been too intimidated to speak out."

Among the qualities Mr. Azinger considered in making his four captain's picks were a player's behavioral style and his ability to fit into a pod he had in mind. In this, he relied heavily on Dr. Braund.

Dr. Braund has a background in counseling psychology, but most of his recent work has been in corporate team-building and in multigenerational succession planning for such family-owned firms as Chik-Fil-A and Hobby Lobby. A book he co-authored with Ken Voges in 1995, "Understanding How Others Misunderstand You," identifies different behavioral types and provides insights into understanding and working with each, rather than trying to change them.

Mr. Azinger's overarching vision, Dr. Braund said, was "to create an environment where each player could succeed by being themselves. He didn't try to motivate them by asking them to fulfill his needs, or the team's needs, but by helping them identify and fulfill their own needs. To do that, he had to understand the behavioral style of each player individually and know how to message him in the best way for him. And Paul has a real gift for that."

In assembling the three pods, Mr. Azinger, Dr. Braund and the assistant coaches spent hours discussing various combinations and settled on two consisting of players with generally similar styles and one that was a mixed bag.

The members of one team, Phil Mickelson, Justin Leonard, Anthony Kim and Hunter Mahan, were aggressive players and were assigned to assistant captain Raymond Floyd, who shared that style as a player. A second team, under Dave Stockton, consisted of steady-eddie, unflappable players: Steve Stricker, Stewart Cink, Chad Campbell and Ben Curtis.

Mr. Azinger sometimes referred to the remaining group as his "Southern boys," even though the only veteran in the pod, Jim Furyk, is from Pennsylvania. ("I was trying to be as Southern as I could all week," Mr. Furyk said afterward.) This pod, under Mr. Browne, included Kenny Perry and J.B. Holmes, Kentuckians playing for the home crowd and thus feeling extra pressure, and the week's break-out personality, good old boy Boo Weekley, whom Dr. Braund described as "impervious to pressure."

This group gelled especially well. "Jim Furyk has struggled as a team player to some extent, because he is such an individual," Dr. Braund said. "But here he had a role to play. He was a steady rudder and tremendously supportive of the other guys, particularly of Kenny Perry when he got down after hitting his drive into the hazard on the final hole in the first foursomes match. That may be one reason Jim performed so well." Mr. Furyk won 2½ points and clinched the Cup on Sunday with his singles win. Mr. Perry also rebounded to win 2½ points.

During the competition, Dr. Braund rode in the cart with Mr. Azinger and helped him keep on point with his "messaging" to players.

"Sometimes, the message was no message," Dr. Braund said. "Paul would just drive by, show a smiling face and ask if everything was OK. But that was based on what we'd worked out beforehand." Other times, the words were more specific.

In the opening match, after Mr. Azinger heard that Messrs. Cink and Campbell had royally botched the seventh hole to go three behind, he rushed to their side to assure them that now all the pressure was on the other side to keep the lead. (The pair came back to win.) If, hypothetically, Mr. Kim had been in that position, the message would have been less one of support than of challenge, something along the lines of "kick them right back," because Mr. Kim focuses more in his matches on playing "against" his opponent, Dr. Braund said.

There was no guarantee all this strategizing would work out, of course. In fact, a final part of Mr. Azinger's strategy was to shift the emphasis away from the need for a team victory and more toward his personal commitment to help each player perform at his best.

"This whole week has been magical," Mr. Weekley said when it was all over. "I think we actually became a family."

At high performance camps, one of the points my colleagues and I try to make is found in the adage, "If you want something you've never had before, you'd better be prepared to do some things you've never done before". Clearly the U.S. had won the Ryder Cup on previous occasions but when you've lost the last five of six, the point is well taken. Full marks to both Captain Azinger and the team for realizing that it wasn't business as usual and that they had to be willing to do some things they had never done before. Capt. Azinger did his homework and used a management approach that was clearly designed to make his team greater than the sum of its parts. Did he know it was going to work? No! But he did know that the past model would most likely fail.

He also understood the psychological battle that parallels the one on the scoreboard and hoped his plan would put his opponent "off" just enough to contribute to making a difference. That worked too!

You will also notice that Capt. Azinger did not treat his players the same. Why would he? They were all different so they should be treated that way. His "inspirational" tactics varied greatly from player-to-player. Sometimes nothing needed to be said only his presence and a reassuring smile. Sometimes a player needed a "pep talk" while another might have benefitted from some technical expertise.

I also like the fact that the assistant captains played a key role. Capt. Azinger chose good people and got out of their way. He let his assistants assist and his players play.

But in my humble opinion, the real key was the fact that neither the team nor its captain and assistants ever used the words "win" or "lose" or their derivatives. It was all about performance! The media used the words "win" & "lose", lots. But the team did not! You can't control outcome goals! Why even discuss them? But you can control or at least have a major influence on performance goals, sometimes referred to as process goals. That's where your focus should be!

Congratulations Team U.S.A.! It was a great performance!

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