

Women's Golf Shines in Rio

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Here are my takeaways from the return of women's golf to the Olympics. First, that the three medal winners are from Korea, New Zealand and China with none from the United States accurately reflects the current competitive climate in the women's game. And secondly, that all three medal winners, and six of the top 10 in Rio, are LPGA major champions speaks for the unqualified success of the return of golf to the Games. The cream rose to the top.

In fact, let's broaden that perspective. Of the six medal winners in men's and women's golf, five have won majors and the sixth, Matt Kuchar of the United States, closed with a 63 in the final round to take bronze. If part of the mission of returning golf to the Games was to help grow golf globally this was a great start. The world was represented on the medal stand and the world watched in massive numbers.

On Saturday, the stoic plodder with the far-from-textbook swing, Inbee Park of Korea, closed with a 66 to take home the women's gold by five strokes over Lydia Ko of New Zealand with Shanshan Feng of China getting the bronze, one stroke farther back. The best way to get the world to watch golf is to have the world in contention and that was the case during the final round at Rio.

Nine countries were represented in the final top 10, with Amy Yang joining Park for Korea. Also in the top 10 were New Zealand (Ko), China (Feng), Japan (Haru Nomura), the United States (Stacy Lewis), Canada (Brooke Henderson), Australia (Minjee Lee), Great Britain (Charley Hull) and Norway (Suzann Pettersen). The medalists for the men were from Great Britain (Justin Rose), Sweden (Henrik Stenson) and the U.S. (Kuchar).

The days of Americans dominating golf are over, and that's not a bad thing. In fact, it's a very good thing, both for competitive excitement and for the financial health of the game. It's not that the Americans have gotten worse; the rest of the world has gotten better. We shouldn't want domination; we

should want competition. Isn't the Ryder Cup a lot more exciting to watch now that Europe is not a punching bag for the U.S. every two years?

And to think that America won't watch if Americans aren't dominating is simply just not true. With NBC and Golf Channel both providing coverage of the men's Olympic tournament, the close was second only to the Masters, the most-watched event in golf, for the highest-rated 90-minute window of final round golf coverage in 2016 with a combined 5.6 household rating and 8.8 million average viewers. And imagine how many eyeballs were on TV sets in other countries.

The ratings data also showed that Olympic golf attracted a younger audience than golf usually gets and that those watching on NBC were watching "The Olympics" and thus not just regular golf viewers. Because golf is part of the Olympics, they were sampling the sport just as they would sample diving or table tennis or handball. As a marketing analyst told me years ago about Tiger Woods: "He's bringing new people into the tent and some of them will return." That's how a sport gains new fans.

Will the International Olympic Committee extend golf beyond the 2020 Games in Tokyo when it votes next year? I think so. I think the IOC will be impressed by the size of the TV audience, the intensity of the completion and the quality of both golf fans and the companies who advertise to those fans. Golf has a loyal base audience and loyal advertisers. That will not be lost on the IOC.

Here are a few of my other takeaways from the women's competition.

- There is absolutely nothing flashy about Inbee Park but she does three things really well: She keeps her golf ball out of trouble; she maintains her composure; and she makes putts. That'll win you a lot of golf tournaments. She is also proof that there is more than one right way to swing a golf club. The key is to make your swing repeat, especially under pressure. When I see her multi-piece move away from the ball I think of what the great Judy Rankin said about Lorena Ochoa: "You'd never teach anyone that swing, but why would you change it?"

- Lydia Ko is a complete breath of fresh air in a sports world that sometimes feels too intense, too aloof and too self-centered. Lydia literally laughs at her bad shots, shows enormous respect for her opponents and totally appreciates how fortunate she is to be making a living playing a game. Asked about Inbee Park, Ko says: “She’s really good. She’s not pretty good. She’s really, really good.”

And how great is her perspective on winning a silver medal? “The greatest memories of this week is to see the other New Zealand athletes, see the New Zealand flag out there and them waving and shouting and supporting. It's been amazing,” she said. “I feel like coming down the stretch, that really helped me to kind of push through. I knew that I wasn't only doing this for me and not only for my team, but for the other athletes that were here and for the whole of New Zealand. Hopefully I made them proud.” How is that for maturity in a 19-year-old?

- The most painful place to finish in the Olympics is fourth, one spot out of winning a medal. And you really have to feel for Stacy Lewis. Of the 11 second-place finishes she’s had since last winning on the LPGA Tour in 2014, this has to be the most hurtful near-miss. She closed with a 66 in Saturday’s final round to finish T-4, one stroke out of a playoff for the bronze medal. In truth, she lost her medal chances in the third round when she shot 76 in 30 mph wind, closing with double bogey 7. I feel also for Gerina Piller, who started the final round two strokes back but finished T-11 after a 74. I also think Gerina’s first win is close at hand.

There are only four majors every year in men’s golf and five for the women and that makes them special, precious, valuable. But there is an Olympics only once every four years. And four years in the life of an athlete is an eternity. Olympic golf felt special and I think that feeling is only going to grow.