# *Introduction*

People frequently ask me where I get book ideas. The answer is there is no process, no rhyme, reason, or rhythm. It is totally random. In the case of the Ryder Cup, though, I can pinpoint the exact moment when I knew with absolute certainty that I wanted to chronicle what I believe is golf's most dramatic event.

*It began shortly after six o'clock on a cool, cloudy September Sunday in the English Midlands.* That was almost exactly what I wrote on the first page of *A Good Walk Spoiled,* my first golf book. The 1993 Ryder Cup had, for all intents and purposes, come down to one match: Davis Love III against Costantino Rocca.

Rocca, a stocky Italian with an appealing smile, had held a one-up lead standing on the 17th tee. He'd had a 15-foot birdie putt on that green that would have won the match and almost certainly given the Cup to Europe. But he'd gotten a little too bold with it and then missed a four-footer coming back as the crowd groaned in horror.

The match was tied.

In those days, before the Ryder Cup completely exploded in popularity and media coverage, having the privilege to walk inside the ropes as a member of the media was an absolute joy. As long as you didn't try to walk right down the middle of the fairway, no one bothered you.

As the players trudged up the hill to the 18th tee at the Belfry (a truly ordinary golf course, but one the British PGA owned, making it a Ryder Cup cash cow every four years), I fell into step with Bruce Edwards.

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Bruce was Tom Watson's caddie and closest friend. Watson was the U.S. captain and had brought Bruce to the Belfry as an unofficial assistant captain since he was as respected by the players as by the caddies. There were people shouting encouragement at both players as we walked onto the tee, and I saw Watson, arms folded, standing next to Love, a few yards from where Bruce and I were standing.

Fifteen minutes earlier, Watson had arrived on the 17th tee with a grim look on his face. As Love departed the 16th green and walked to where Watson stood, the captain had said, "Davis, we really need this match."

Love is one of the truly nice people in sports. I've always said if there were a picture in the dictionary of a "gentle man" (or a gentleman), it would be of Love. He was a Ryder Cup rookie, fighting Rocca, the crowd, and his nerves every step of the way.

But when Watson told him that the U.S. really needed this match, Love almost burst out laughing.

"I almost said, 'No shit, Tom.' " Love said later. "But I kept it to myself."

The 18th hole at the Belfry is one of the great match-play finishing holes in golf—a truly wonderful par-4 that comes after sixteen holes that run together in one's mind (and one other excellent hole, the short par-4 10th, a terrific risk/reward hole).

The 18th also had plenty of risk and reward, with water running down the left side of the fairway. In 1989, with the Cup at stake on Sunday, no fewer than four Americans had found that water, leading to a 14–14 tie—with Europe retaining the Cup since it had won the matches in the U.S. in 1987.

Love was one of the longest hitters on tour, so if he crushed a driver it would run through the fairway and into the right rough—perhaps into the large bunker in the landing area. The question was three-wood or one-iron.

"Might be a one-iron," Watson said.

Love disagreed. He had the tee and wanted to give Rocca something to think about. So he took out the three-wood and smashed it down the fairway to a perfect spot. As the ball landed, I felt Bruce's hand on my arm.

"Thank God," he said in a barely audible voice.

He leaned over and began taking deep breaths. "I've never been this nervous," he said. "Never."

Bruce had caddied for Watson for twenty years and had been by his side when he chipped in on the 17th hole at Pebble Beach in 1982 to beat Jack Nicklaus in the U.S. Open. He had been in a lot of pressurized situations. To put it mildly.

"Never?" I asked. "Pebble Beach?"

Bruce shook his head. "This is different. This is bigger than that."

I looked around the tee—packed with players and caddies from both teams whose matches were over—and saw European captain Bernard Gallacher whispering in Rocca's ear before Rocca pulled a club from his bag.

A sudden chill went through me. This *was* a big deal—it was also remarkable fun to watch and to *feel*. I remembered something Bud Collins had said to me years earlier during an extraordinarily intense U.S. Open tennis semifinal between Chris Evert and Tracy Austin. "Some things in sports have to be *felt*. Seeing and hearing isn't enough."

The Ryder Cup is one of those events. As everyone walked down the fairway—Rocca had missed right and was in deep rough—I looked around and thought, "Someday, I want to write about all *this*."

It took me only twenty-three years to get around to it. I was at the Belfry for those matches as part of my research for *A Good Walk Spoiled*.

As it turned out, Love and Rocca gave me the perfect opening for that book, especially after Love later told me that he had stood in the middle of the 18th fairway feeling as if he might get sick in front of millions of people. Nerves are one thing; feeling physically ill about hitting a golf shot is another.

That's the way the Ryder Cup is though—for everyone involved. Every player who has ever teed it up in one has a story about walking onto the 1st tee to play his first match. Keegan Bradley, who played superbly for the U.S. in 2012 at Medinah in his Ryder Cup debut, can remember that first morning almost minute by minute.

"It started when I was driving to the golf course," he said. "It was five thirty in the morning—still dark outside. But as I drove in, I went past

the grandstand behind the 17th green. It was *full*—at five thirty in the morning. It occurred to me that no one would come anywhere close to that green for more than five hours—at least. And it was already packed.

"I thought, 'My God, what have I gotten myself into?'

"It kept getting worse. Phil [Mickelson] and I were playing the second match against Luke [Donald] and Sergio [García]. I was standing on the putting green when Jim Furyk and Brandt Snedeker left to walk across the bridge to the 1st tee for the first match. I saw them heading across the bridge and I thought, 'Oh God, we're next.'

"I walked over to Phil. I felt like I was hyperventilating. I said, 'Phil, I'm not sure I can go through with this.' I was wondering if there was any way at all I could get out of it. He just looked at me, smiled, and said, 'Don't worry, Keegan. Luke and Sergio have never lost a foursomes (alternate shot) match. Nothing to be nervous about.'

"By the time I got onto the bridge, I wasn't sure I could put one foot in front of the other."

Bradley's story is like a lot of others. He was one of the lucky ones. On pure adrenaline, he hit his first drive well over 300 yards, and Mickelson put a wedge so close he left Bradley with a tap-in birdie.

"After that I was all right," he said.

He and Mickelson went on to win, 4 and 3.

Snedeker was also a rookie that day. Furyk—who was playing in his eighth straight Ryder Cup—had the tee for the Americans. He hit a snap hook.

"I should have been thinking, 'Oh God, do I have a shot from over there?' " Snedeker said. "Instead I was thinking, 'Hey, if Jim Furyk can be nervous enough to hit a snap hook, then it's okay for me to be scared to death too.' "

Padraig Harrington, who has played on five European teams and was a vice captain at Hazeltine in 2016, may have explained it best for all of them: "I remember standing over the ball and standing over the ball and standing over the ball," he said. "At some point the thought occurred to me that 'none of these people are leaving until I swing the club.' It was a terrifying thought."

Terror is a very real emotion in the Ryder Cup. So is absolute joy and absolute despair. When the U.S. team blew a 10–6 lead on Sunday in those 2012 matches at Medinah, every single person in the American team room—players, vice captains, caddies—cried. That night, the

unofficial tradition of the two teams getting together to toast one another and have a few—or more—drinks together was broken.

Most of the time, the losing team goes to the winning team's wrap-up party to congratulate the winners and toast them. When the Americans didn't show up, the Europeans sent word wondering if they were coming—or if they'd prefer that the Europeans come to them.

The answer was neither. "We were told, 'No thanks, we're just not up to it,' " said Ian Poulter, a huge part of that European win. "I remember Davis [Love] coming in to represent them, but that was about it."

"We just thought—we *knew*—they were too devastated to spend time with us that night," Rory McIlroy said. "The best thing we could do for them was leave them alone."

Major championships bring out major emotions—especially when there is a dramatic finish. When Phil Mickelson played superbly in 2016 at Royal Troon but lost the Open Championship to Henrik Stenson because Stenson played historically well, there was consolation in knowing he had played great golf and that there was no shame in finishing second to Stenson that day.

There is no second place at the Ryder Cup—no consolation prize. Playing well on a losing team does almost nothing to make the defeat more bearable. At the Ryder Cup, one team wins and one team loses. No one finishes second.

That may explain why Bubba Watson, who was the thirteenth man on a twelve-man American team in 2016, wept after the U.S. won the matches at Hazeltine. Watson had played on losing American teams in 2010, 2012, and 2014. Early in 2016 he had talked about how much he wanted to be part of a winning team *once* before he retired.

But he had lost out to Ryan Moore for the final spot on Love's team and went to Hazeltine as a last-second vice captain because he wanted to be part of the team—in any way possible. He had surprised even his would-be teammates by throwing body and soul into the week.

As fate would have it, Moore scored the clinching point for the U.S. on Sunday afternoon. In the midst of the celebration next to the 18th green, Watson found Moore, hugged him, and then leaned down (Watson is six-three, Moore five-nine) and kissed him firmly on the cheek.

"I love you, man," Watson said. "I love you."

Then he wept. And he hadn't hit a single shot.

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Ian Poulter didn't play at Hazeltine either. Like Bubba Watson, he was a vice captain, only on the losing side. It was a feeling Poulter was unaccustomed to, having played in five Ryder Cups for Europe, winning four times. Poulter has never won a major title, but he is considered one of the great Ryder Cup players of all time, with a record of 12-4-1.

In 2012, when Europe pulled off the "Miracle at Medinah" (better known in the U.S. as the "Meltdown at Medinah"), it was Poulter leading the way as Europe rallied from what had been a 10–4 deficit on Saturday afternoon to what became a 14½–13½ win on Sunday evening.

Poulter started the rally in Saturday's final four-ball match when he birdied the last five holes to give him and Rory McIlroy a come-from-behind one-up victory over Jason Dufner and Zach Johnson. Since Sergio García and Luke Donald had pulled out a one-up victory over Tiger Woods and Steve Stricker a few minutes earlier, the 10–4 lead the U.S. had enjoyed suddenly became 10–6—and Europe had all the momentum.

"I remember looking at the board at some point and thinking to myself, 'This is a blowout, we're getting embarrassed,'" McIlroy remembered. "Then Ian went on that run and it was like a jolt of electricity went through all of us. We charged into the team room that night feeling like we were *leading* 10–6. We were convinced we were going to win."

McIlroy likes to jokingly point out to people that he started the rally by birdieing the 13th hole, but he's the first to admit that Poulter was the hero that weekend.

The Americans were fully aware of how remarkably Poulter had played. "When we shook hands on 18 after he'd made the fifth birdie, I said, 'Great playing, man, just unbelievable,'" Dufner said. "Then I turned to Rory and said, 'Glad to play with you today.'"

McIlroy understood. He *had* birdied 13, but Poulter had won the match.

"You cannot—*cannot*—describe what that feels like," Poulter said. "I've had good moments in my career, very good ones. I've been in contention on Sunday at majors. But there is nothing like the feeling in that cauldron. It's not just electrifying, it's someplace out there beyond electrifying."

The next night, after Europe had rallied to win, Lee Westwood, who is the third leading scorer in European Ryder Cup history (behind only Nick Faldo and Colin Montgomerie), made an announcement during the Euros' raucous post-victory press conference.

"We have a new system for picking the team going forward," he said. "It'll be eight guys on points, three captain's picks, and Poults—regardless of how he's playing."

That scenario had almost come into play in 2016. Poulter was struggling with his game in the spring, but still holding out hope he would come around enough to allow Captain Darren Clarke to pick him for the "Poults" slot. Just when he felt his game starting to improve, he began to experience severe pain in his right foot in mid-May. Cortisone shots didn't help. It turned out he had an arthritic joint that doctors said required at least four months of rest and rehab. It meant he couldn't possibly play at Hazeltine.

"Hard to take," Poulter said. "I'll still be in the room [Clarke named him a vice captain almost instantly], but it won't be the same. Can't be the same. I'll miss it terribly."

The European team, as it turned out, would miss him more. When it was over, Poulter wasn't sure if that was the case.

"Painful to have to watch," Poulter said. "Helpless feeling. You miss a major, it's disappointing. You miss the Ryder Cup, it's heartbreaking."

Or, as American Jimmy Walker put it early in 2016 when it appeared he might not make the team, "I don't think I can watch if I'm not playing. I've played in it once. I don't ever want to not play in it again."

Walker won the PGA Championship later that summer—his first major title. One of the first things he said after hoisting the Wanamaker Trophy was "Winning this is absolutely great. And now I'm on the Ryder Cup team."

In truth, it might have been Rafael Cabrera-Bello, one of the six rookies on the European team at Hazeltine, who spoke most eloquently for all twenty-four players.

"The only problem with this weekend," he said, "is that now I feel as if playing in any other tournament is ruined for me because this was so good."

Cabrera-Bello was on the losing team.

The Ryder Cup, as Tom Watson pointed out to his players before those

1993 matches at the Belfry, is the only event in golf where your legs will shake on the 1st tee. For the players, it is the most cherished moment of terror in golf. For the rest of us, it's just a moment to be cherished.

It has become golf's most intense and emotional weekend, which is why I have come to think of it as golf's first—and best—major.