

# David vs Goliath

**Richard Asher** delves into the world of golf statistics and investigates whether hitting it long or finding fairways is the key to winning Majors.

**Y**ou know the guy. He whips his club out, pulls off the cover, tosses it away with his half-smoked ciggy. Couple of waggles, and... BOOM, 270 metres. He's onto the second puff of his reclaimed smoke before it stops bounding down the fairway. Now it's your turn. Good luck, china.

Don't you hate that guy? They won't admit it, but pros get this feeling too. Our own Tim Clark is one of them. David Toms, Graeme McDowell (GMac to some) and Jim Furyk, despite being Major champions, are in the same boat. And they're in good company, with the previous world No 1 Luke Donald also on board. It's all relative, but these are the pros that most club players can identify with.

It seems fair to say that if these fellas can still win tournaments at the highest level – despite the efforts of big-hitting Bubba Watson, Alvaro Quiros et al – then golf is better for it. The fact that a tap-in counts the same as a drive murdered down the middle is exactly what makes golf the relentless challenge that it is. And it doesn't get much more relentless, or challenging, than it does at the United States Open Championship.

Before we turn our attention to The Olympic Club, let's rewind to the US Open's antithesis, played at Augusta, where there's no such

thing as an unplayable lie (proven by Watson on the second playoff hole), and the 'first cut' is as much of a deterrent as a 'beware of the hamster' sign.

The recent Masters boiled down to a battle between two of the game's longer hitters, smooth-swinging Louis Oosthuizen and gorilla-gouging Watson, with Watson donning the Green Jacket.

It was entertaining, as wide-open Augusta is just the arena for that sort of duel. If we're trying to argue for the value of big hitting at Augusta, our first glance at the driving distance figures screams 'case closed' in favour of the bombers. Oosthuizen and Watson, the co-leaders after 72 holes, were second and fourth in driving distance. Smashing it miles has a lot to do with Masters success, it would seem.

But then you look further down the list, to where they've lumped the 'missed the cut' statistics.

And you realise that the three longest hitters in Masters week – Quiros, Kyle Stanley and Robert Garrigus – were all twiddling their thumbs on the weekend. Ah, not so clear after all.

Oosthuizen's accuracy from the tee at Augusta was far superior to Watson's. He was seventh for the week, hitting an outstanding 82 percent of fairways. Watson





**“I THINK THAT THE US OPEN AT OLYMPIC CAN BE WON BY JUST ABOUT ANY TYPE OF PLAYER”**

– Pete Cowen

languished on 66 percent – which is probably why he was good enough at playing out from the trees to make South Africans curse in the small hours of April 9. Larry Mize, incidentally, was the most accurate driver of the week, hitting nearly 93 percent of his fairways (just for two rounds, granted) at 53 years of age. What do we learn from this? That it's quite possible to overthink golf statistics!

Nonetheless, while big hitting isn't a guarantee of a Green Jacket, it's fair to say that those with jackets tend to smash it a good distance. Those Furyk, GMac and Toms Majors did not come at Augusta National. And few are expecting Donald's breakthrough to come there either.

But as we turn our attention to the US Open, we remember that not every golf tournament is like the Masters. It will be possible for a very different kind of player to shine at The Olympic Club. Look at the last winner there, says Oosthuizen's (and Lee Westwood's) coach, Pete Cowen.

“When Lee Janzen won in 1998 he wasn't a long hitter, but he was a fantastic putter and had a good temperament. If you spray it at Olympic, you're in dire trouble. Accuracy will mean an awful lot, and a lot of guys will be hitting rescues and fairway woods.”

This is what the Clarks and Donalds of the world like to hear. A premium on hitting the short grass, which they're good at doing, according to Tiger Woods' former coach Hank Haney: “Shorter hitters are typically straighter. They will have an advantage on courses

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**LEFT** The current battle for the top spot in the world is between Rory McIlroy and Luke Donald, one of the longest versus one of the shortest hitters off the tee.

that are shorter and tighter like Harbour Town and Colonial. The longer hitters have the advantage on certain courses as well.

"I think that the US Open at Olympic can be won by just about any type of player, but there will be a pretty good premium on playing from the fairway."

If only it were simple enough for us to say short and straight is the way to go – but no such luck! The US Open has not been the exclusive domain of the popguns at all. Tiger, Ernie, Retief, even Rory last year, all of them were among the game's longer hitters at the time of their wins. Not all that surprising when we consider that length and accuracy are far from being mutually exclusive.

Haney explains it as succinctly as anyone: "Length is always an advantage in golf. You get accuracy in golf from having either a great swing or less distance, but you also get accuracy in golf from having distance, because you get to hit a shorter club with more loft. And loft gives you backspin, which counteracts sidespin."

Figuring out exactly what is the most important thing to get right at the US Open is an interesting challenge, as you quickly learn

when looking at the tournament stats since 2007.

A good starting point is probably McIlroy's effort at Congressional last year; the most convincing lesson in how to win it given by anyone since Tiger at Pebble Beach in 2000. Was hitting fairways a key feature?

The surprising answer is no. McIlroy only hit 64 percent of his fairways, while five guys were over the 75 percent mark. None of them, however, cracked the top 10. Incidentally, the week's top four bombers didn't exactly cover themselves in glory, with Gary Woodland the best of them in 23rd.

Greens in regulation, on the other hand, seemed to be a big deal. Rory was first in this department, with a memorable 86 percent success rate, and, interestingly, defending champ McDowell was second when it came to hitting the greens. He'd only been 15th in GIR at Pebble when he'd won, but with nobody doing better than 66 percent that week, there was a high premium on scrambling. Want another brain-fryer? The Pebble Beach GIR-topper in question was none other than big-bomber Dustin Johnson, who was also No 1 in driving distance that week!

**BELOW** Jim Furyk and David Toms, along with Graeme McDowell, are currently the top three most accurate drivers of the ball, yet none of them are considered long by any means. However, they have all won Majors.



**POWER MISMATCHES**

■ **BOBBY LOCKE VS SAM SNEAD**

Denis Hutchinson will tell you that Locke could smash the ball a country mile if he so desired, but the truth is that the four-time Open Championship winner was not in the same league as one of his great rivals, 'Slamin' Sam Snead. Snead was remarkably athletic and threw everything into his tee shots, becoming the best driver of his generation. Locke, however, had long discovered that the secret to winning was on the putting surface and the South African was regarded as the best putter of his era – and those to follow.

■ **GARY PLAYER VS JACK NICKLAUS**

Gary Player had already recorded two Major wins (and a third soon followed) by the time Jack Nicklaus burst onto the scene in 1962. Although they would go on to be great friends and great rivals on it, the two had completely contrasting



styles of play. Nicklaus played long off the tee, while Player, although not the shortest hitter around, simply didn't have the strength to match him. Often the South African would find himself 40 metres behind Nicklaus on the fairway. Still, a combined 27 Majors between the pair showed that results don't follow any particular style.

■ **LUKE DONALD VS EVERYBODY ELSE**

As one of the shorter hitters about, Luke Donald stands out from his contemporaries, and not just because he is 30 metres behind them on the fairway. His



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**1** SA's four-time Major winner Bobby Locke believed in the old adage of "drive for show but putt for dough".

**2** Despite their size and power differences, Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player became massive rivals.

magical wedge play and a putter that seems to never grow cold have helped the Englishman rise to the top of the World Ranking, and keep him competitive against the likes of Rory McIlroy, Lee Westwood, Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson.



**LEFT** Newest Masters champion Bubba Watson holds nothing back on the tee. And people think pink is for girls!

longest hitters at Olympic know this. Can they make sure they hit the short grass? Can they rein themselves in if necessary? Do they prioritise accuracy?

"They probably don't do it as much as they should do," says Cowen. "Course management isn't always a priority with them. Bubba could hit a rescue far enough. But on the other hand, would he hit the fairway?"

That's an intriguing question: a guy like Watson draws so much confidence from his driver, who's to say a rescue would be more accurate? "Hitting a driver means they don't have time to try and manipulate the swing, which can be a good thing," says Cowen.

While the bombers and their coaches ponder that question, the guys who have no choice but to pull out their driver can rest assured that they still have every chance of winning the US Open.

"You can't say that any US Open course is a bomber's paradise," says globetrotting tour coach Jamie Gough. "You've got to keep it in play and you can't overpower the course. And you've got to chip well, because US Open greens are small and fast."

Before we get lost in a swamp of scrambling stats though, let's give the final word to Olympic's 1987 winner Scott Simpson.

"I was good in the Open because there was such an emphasis and premium on accuracy. I was a real patient player, who could handle making a bogey or even a double-bogey and bounce back. I loved that challenge. I loved golf when it was at its hardest."

Did we mention that Simpson was 177th out of a total of 188 in driving distance on the US Tour that year, with a cute (even for the time) average of 230 metres? Or that Lee Janzen barely scraped into the top 50 in driving length in the year of his triumph at The Olympic Club? The 'Davids' versus the 'Goliaths' may like the sound of that... **CG**

Which rather bears out Haney's point about how length and accuracy can work in tandem.

Anyway, was hitting fairways the 'be all and end all' at Pebble, then? Nope. GMac was way down with a score of 66 percent, and none of the top three in driving accuracy made the top 20.

Lucas Glover's best stat when he won in 2009, was also greens in regulation (T4), although his statistics were impressive in all departments. He was eighth in driving distance and T14 for accuracy, alongside McDowell.

At first glance, the 2007 and 2008 US Opens tell us different tales. Angel Cabrera and Woods were both second in driving distance for their respective glory weeks – and distance was their best department. Yet both were mediocre in the fairway-hitting stakes, but then right up there

for hitting greens (T3 and T14 respectively). This suggests that whether you're a power hitter or not, it's still the second half of the hole that's the business end.

Golf statistics are as tricky as sinking a five-footer for the match. We haven't even looked at the stats for putting, which are notoriously difficult to interpret in any useful way. And when a wild slice into the trees counts for the same as a nice lie in shallow rough, driving accuracy stats have to be kept in perspective too.

But if there's a hint of a pattern in the above, it's that hitting greens on schedule has been arguably the key ingredient for recent US Open winners – whether long or short off the tee.

The common-sense truth that hitting fairways is helpful for hitting greens cannot be dimmed by any number of statistics; even the