

# CRACKING

*the*

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# CODE

THE WINNING RYDER CUP STRATEGY:  
MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU

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## THE CODE

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*G*olf on the PGA Tour is the ultimate individual sport. If you don't perform, you don't get paid. You have no salary, and no teammates to pick you up.

As Americans we honor the kind of individual greatness that golf spotlights. Every other year, however, we attempt to lay individualism aside and come together as a team, when the twelve best American golfers compete with Europe's twelve best for the Ryder Cup. Many professional golfers who have played in Ryder Cup competition will tell you the pressure to win for our country is greater than at any other tournament, even the majors.

For twenty-five years, beginning after the 1983 matches, the Europeans dominated the Ryder Cup, winning eight of the eleven

events, even though we had been heavily favored to win most of them. The disheartening results embarrassed our players, yet no one seemed to have an answer for the Europeans. “Let’s have no more talk about the Americans having the best players, the most major championships, the strongest team,” the Associated Press wrote. “They are now the underdogs in this every-other-year matchup, unable to compete with the camaraderie, creativity, or fearlessness of their European counterparts.”

A stinging indictment.

The PGA of America invited me to serve as captain of the 2008 United States Ryder Cup team. It was a daunting challenge. The last time we had brought the Cup home had been 1999; so much history on the course and off in those nine years. The 2001 match, scheduled for September 28–30, had been postponed for a year because of the September 11 attacks. We had not won the Ryder Cup since then, losing in 2002, 2004, and 2006.

To bring the Ryder Cup back to the United States, I knew, would require radical thinking: a team approach to a game dominated by individual greatness. Working with my friend Ron Braund, a life coach and corporate team-building expert, we focused on several key principles—the code—that work in elite military operations and successful business organizations:

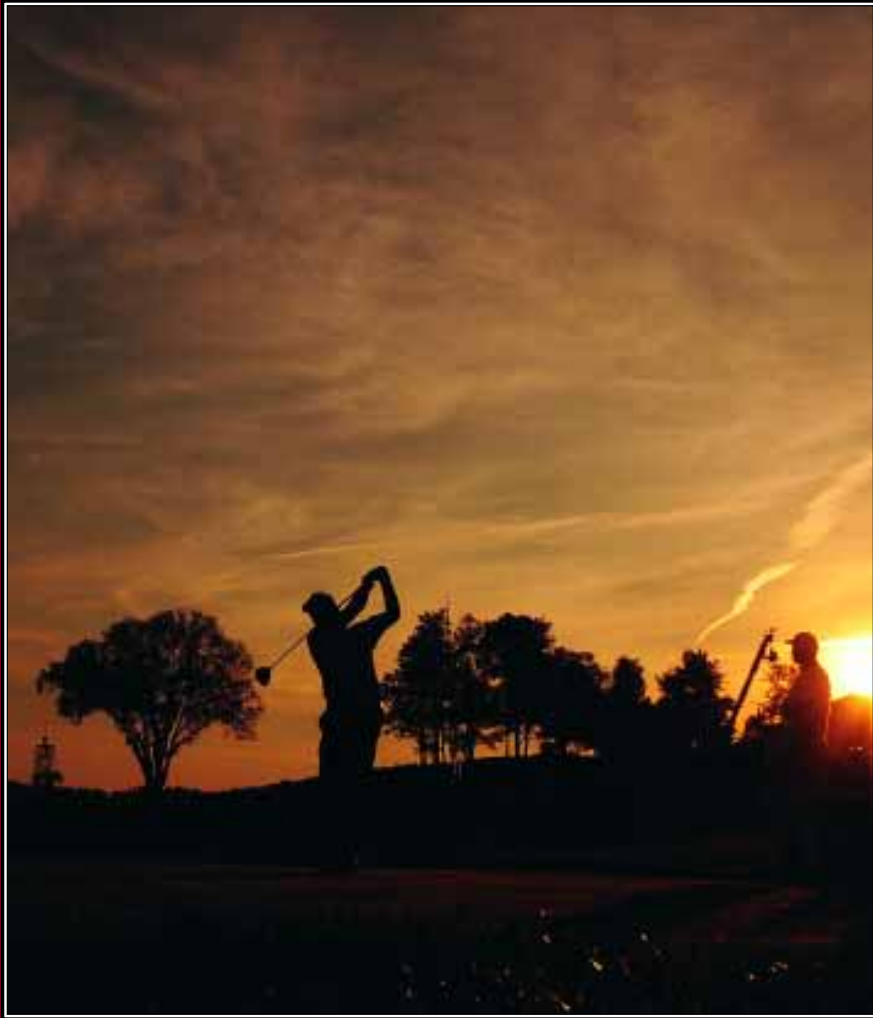
- ✦ Break the twelve-man team into small pods of four players each.
- ✦ Place players in pods based on their personality types rather than on particular strengths in their golf games.
- ✦ Change the traditional Ryder Cup points system to allow “hotter”

players to win a place on the team. Also, give the captain four “captain’s picks” instead of two.

- ✦ Control the controllables.
- ✦ Trust and empower assistant coaches and the players.
- ✦ Communicate with each golfer appropriately, based on his personality type.

Our players, along with their wives and caddies, embraced the code and the opportunity to become more than a team, and by the end of the week, when the United States had won the Ryder Cup by a surprising 16½ to 11½ margin, we were more than a team. We were a family.

We hope you will enjoy our story and then make our team-building strategy work within your organization to foster camaraderie, creativity, and fearlessness.



# 1

## THE FIRST TEST

*U*-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A!”

The cheers pounded my chest as the flags waved and Phil Mickelson’s drive flew twenty-five yards past Padraig Harrington’s ball, landing in the middle of the first fairway. It was barely eight o’clock on Friday morning, and already nine years of pent-up Ryder Cup frustration echoed across the Kentucky countryside. The game was on. More than a game, really. More than golf. The Ryder Cup is about country. About pride. The best of the United States versus the best of Europe. And in five of the previous six matches since 1993, including the last three straight, the Europeans had won the Cup. Year after year our guys had to answer the same questions about folding under pressure, playing uptight, losing despite holding a clear advantage in talent. Some

*The beginning of the Ryder Cup competition offered both anticipation and hope. The performance on the course would determine the outcome in the quest to reclaim the Ryder Cup for the United States. The first American shot was placed in the hands of six-time Ryder Cup veteran Phil Mickelson. ~ Ron Braund*

even dared ask if the American players cared anymore.

We cared. You look at the faces, you see the tears, and you know. We cared. We wanted the Cup as badly as any athlete wants any championship, for ourselves and for our country. And when this crowd, which had revved us up the night before at a raucous pep rally in downtown Louisville, thundered its approval of Phil's first tee shot, we wanted to bring the Cup home for them.

I stood several paces behind the tee as my counterpart, Nick Faldo, spoke to his players, and I remembered my first Ryder Cup. It was 1989 at The Belfry, in Sutton Coldfield, England. Nick and I already had something of a rivalry, at least in my mind. During Saturday afternoon fourball competition my partner, Chip Beck, and I faced Nick and Ian Woosnam. "I don't know about you, Chipper," I said as we walked toward the first tee, "but for me this is personal." I just wanted to beat the guy; I didn't want them celebrating at our expense. It took everything we had, 11-under par, to win 2 and 1.

Now here we were again, two decades later, Nick and I at the first tee, and neither of us would swing a club. I was captain of the United States Ryder Cup team; Nick was captain of the European team. I wanted to beat him and his team as badly as I had in 1989, but I would have to rely on my twelve guys and the plan we had laid out. The feeling was an odd one. When I held a golf club, I was in control. Win or lose, my destiny was in my hands. This time all I could do was watch. For two years, since my selection as captain, I had been working toward this moment. In fact, long before I was named U.S. captain I was considering a team-building plan that I thought would give the United States the best opportunity for success. I asked the PGA of America to overhaul



*Nobody on the 2008 Ryder Cup team was more confident than the youngest player, Anthony Kim, shown here with his caddie, Eric Larson. Throughout the week Paul would tap into that confidence, and the fresh enthusiasm of all six U.S. Ryder Cup rookies. ~ R.B.*

the way the Ryder Cup team was selected and managed, and the role the captain and assistant captains would play, and they had gone out on a limb and agreed. Now it was up to the players.

The Friday morning matches were foursomes, or alternate shot, with two players on each team. One tees off, the other hits next, and so on. Robert Karlsson, Harrington's partner, hit the second shot from the fairway for the Europeans, an eight-iron that he stiffed to six feet to the left of the hole. Then Anthony Kim ("AK"), one of six Ryder Cup rookies on our team, left his approach twenty feet short. Phil missed the long putt, then Pádraig made his, and our guys were down one hole. In fact, by the time all four

groups had played through one, we had lost the hole three times.

Two and a half hours later Phil stood beside the fourteenth tee box and watched AK drill a five-iron straight toward the flag 215 yards away. The gallery, so eager for an American win, exploded with red, white, and blue whoops of joy and shouts of, “You da man, AK!” Not Phil. He knew. So did AK. Pumped up from winning the thirteenth hole after the Europeans had won ten, eleven, and twelve, AK made a great swing, but with too much juice. The ball would never hold, and the downslope behind the green made for one of the toughest up-and-downs on the course.

Cheers turned to groans and the dozens of American flags in the gallery fell limp as the ball rolled off the back of the green and down the embankment toward the television tower. The momentum was lost. It wasn’t even noon on the first day of competition, and already the gallery sensed another American disaster looming. The first American pairing on the course, with our best player, was about to be three holes down with four to play against Harrington and Karlsson. AK glanced over at Phil as if to say, “Sorry, partner.” Phil gave him a hint of a smile and shrugged a silent, “It’s okay.” AK had given Phil an almost impossible lie—even for the best short-game player in the world—in the most pressure-packed setting in golf.

I sat down heavily in the captain’s cart. I had to say something. I couldn’t just sit and watch. My guys needed a word of encouragement, especially AK. Not so much Phil; what do you say to a player with well over thirty tournament wins? He’d dug out of deeper holes than this one a dozen times, and he didn’t need any advice from me. But AK, the cocky twenty-three-year-old kid with the infectious smile and barely two years on the PGA Tour, was another story. His



*It was a privilege to join Paul as his advisor and consultant for the Ryder Cup. Here we observe the action on the course as events unfolded on Friday morning. One of my roles was to evaluate situations and provide information to help him message the players during the matches. ~ R.B.*

passion reminded me of my own. AK took this thing personally.

“What do I say?” I thought out loud.

“Challenge him,” Ron said. Ron Braund, sitting beside me in the cart, was a corporate team-building consultant who had worked with me to shape this team, showing me the principles of personality profiling and how matching personalities between partners could make an even greater impact on our team than matching golf skills.

“What?” I asked Ron, wondering how he knew what I was thinking.

“AK,” Ron said. “You’ve got to challenge him. Get his attention. You challenge him and he’ll respond.”

Two years earlier I would have told you Ron’s advice was a bunch

of psychobabble nonsense. But as captain I had only a few variables I could control. The message was one of those. And the way I delivered that message had to change, depending on who I was addressing.

*Challenge him.*

I looked for the quickest way around the gallery to get to the fourteenth green, then I popped the brake and backtracked across the thirteenth fairway—there was no governor on the captains' carts, so we were flying—then through the rough beside fourteen toward the fifteenth tee. Slowing down to weave through the tremendous crowds was like swimming in syrup, but I finally found a break in the mass of humanity on the hillside behind the fifteenth tee. I jumped out of the cart, walked around the television tower, and caught them as Phil was examining the lie. It was even worse than I thought. Not only was it below the two-tiered green, it had ended up in grass already trampled by the gallery. You couldn't have walked it out there and placed it in a worse spot.

For a moment I simply stood among the gallery and thought about where we were. Over the last two years, at my request, the PGA of America had changed the way players qualified for the team, changed the Ryder Cup team selection process, and changed the order of play so that the matches began with foursomes, which historically had been stronger for the U.S. than the fourball (or "best ball") format. I had asked some of the most qualified and competent men in the game to be my assistant captains and then involved them in every aspect of team leadership. We had taken a never-before-tried approach to team building, and I had preached the gospel of preparation to every member of the team, giving them confidence in the fact that I had complete confidence in them. After all that and much

more, the first group on Friday morning, Phil Mickelson and Anthony Kim, were two down and in deep trouble with time running out. I had to challenge AK, and I had to do it now.

I stepped over the rope, and AK, who hadn't seen me since he teed off, didn't say anything initially. I stood about four feet away from him with my arms folded. I looked at him and then looked away. When I looked back, AK said, "What's wrong, Cap'n?"

The place was almost completely silent as the gallery watched Phil size up the mess he was in. I didn't want the crowd to hear what I had to say, or to distract Phil from his nearly impossible task, so in the firmest whisper I could manage, I responded, "Buddy, I thought you were going to show me something today. You're not showing me squat!"

The trademark grin came back, and he said, "Relax, Cap'n. They're not gonna beat us."

Then Phil, who hadn't heard any of our conversation, hit one of the greatest flop shots of his life. From a place where most of the guys out there that weekend couldn't have gotten the ball within ten feet of the hole, he dropped it on the perfect spot to catch the ride down and stop three feet from the cup. In the meantime, the Europeans had their own struggles, bogeying the hole. AK made the par putt, and suddenly instead of being three down, he and Phil were just one hole behind with all the momentum.

One hole later AK hit a wedge to within twelve feet on exactly the right line to give Phil a straight uphill putt. When that putt fell, they had squared the match.

AK saw me again on eighteen, smiled even bigger than before, and said, "I told you, Cap'n."



*These two photographs sum up in large degree the important balance of team building and execution for the success of the U.S. team. Phil Mickelson's amazing flop shot at fourteen on Friday morning was a reminder that even after all the team building, players still have to make the shots. In the opposite photo you see the team dynamic at work.*

Now it was my turn to smile. "Yes, you did." He and Phil halved the match to earn the first half-point of the week, and the turnaround felt like a win. They had come through like the champions they are.

At the highest level of competitive golf, the difference between winning and losing is razor thin. One putt out of a hundred that lips out instead of going in is all it takes. That's true in most professional sports. Jeff Gordon says the difference between winning a NASCAR championship and finishing in the middle of the pack is so slight that most people never realize it exists. Major League



*Anthony Kim spots the ball after the shot, and Raymond Floyd, one of Paul's assistant captains, comes onto the green to congratulate Phil. Raymond, a former Ryder Cup captain himself and a winner of four major championships, could not assist the players on the course, but he remained a constant, encouraging presence. All three assistant captains, Raymond, Dave Stockton, and Olin Browne, took active leadership roles throughout the week. ~R.B.*

batting coaches will tell you a one-inch change in a batter's stance can mean the difference between hitting .220 and .330.

Nerves are part of that mix. Nerves happen. You can't see them, but they're always there. You hear them in the quiver of a singer's voice, and sense them in the eyes of a student who gets a tough question. Nerves are all around you: in bouncing feet before the opening tip of a play-off game or the fidgets prior to the first pitch of a World Series. They're the churn in your stomach before a big meeting, the thump in your chest when you head down your first black-diamond ski slope, the knot in your throat as you ask

for the sale. Nerves are as natural as rain on a rooftop. They are God's way of telling you to stand up straight and pay attention, something big is headed your way.

There isn't a golfer on the planet who doesn't know the feeling. You're standing on the tee needing a par to shoot a career round or beat a friend for the first time, or you have a putt to win a bet, or a match, or a tournament. *Focus*, you tell yourself. Then you take a deep breath and go through your pre-shot routine—visualize, practice swing, waggle—each step intended to help you relax. Whether you're an eighteen-handicapper who never plays anything more important than your local member-guest, or a PGA Tour veteran, you know the feeling. Nerves happen. It's part of the game.

I had gone toe to toe with nerves at various times in my career. Having a putt to win a major championship in sudden-death is a nerve-wracking experience, and I had survived that. But I had ten years experience on the tour by then. Now, like every U.S. captain since Jack Nicklaus in 1987, I was a rookie, and I had six rookie players on my team. As the golf cart I was driving plowed through the dew-covered rough on that clear September morning in 2008, I trusted our system and the relationships we had created to help us avoid rookie mistakes.

The Ryder Cup is one of the biggest pressure cookers in sports, and one of the few golf events that can bring the game's greatest players to tears. I had been there too, wearing the colors of team USA, standing on the tee with the flag of my country on my bag when my name was announced, and breath suddenly became tough to find. In 2002, the last time I was a member of a Ryder Cup team, I was the first player out in the first match on Friday morning. It was back at



*The pressure cooker works both ways, and a leader seeks every opportunity to turn up the pressure on his opponent. On the tee at fourteen the American crowd makes its presence felt with Padraig Harrington of Ireland. ~R.B.*

The Belfry, and Captain Curtis Strange had paired me with Tiger Woods. As if playing with Tiger on the world's biggest stage wasn't enough, at least ten thousand people crowded into the stands and lined the first fairway when I stepped onto the tee. They weren't your typical golf crowd either. Thousands were cheering and singing, "Olé, Olé, Olé" at seven in the morning! When the starter said, "Now on the tee, representing the United States of America . . ." the hair on my arms stood on end. A third of the people, the Americans, whooped like it was a football game. The other two-thirds sat in stone silence. It was a surreal moment, one I'll probably never experience again, and certainly one I'll never forget. But once the gun sounded and we were off the first tee, my instincts kicked in and I was able to settle into my normal routine. Having played on four Ryder Cup

teams—two wins, one loss, and one tie that left the Cup in Europe's hands—I had experienced the full range of Ryder Cup emotions. I knew the agony that coursed through the losers, and I knew the overwhelming joy that filled the winners.

Unfortunately, too few American pros knew what winning a Ryder Cup felt like. We lost at The Belfry in 2002 and got humiliated in 2004 and 2006. In 2008, for the first time, we were underdogs. Now my job as Ryder Cup captain was to create an environment where our guys could bond and thrive as a team—and be standing on the right side of that razor-thin line on Sunday evening.



Losing so badly in recent Ryder Cup competition presented me with a great opportunity to make fundamental changes to the well-established system. Had we not gotten our butts kicked in years past, I probably would have met more resistance to my ideas. But as is the case in business or social settings, great challenges open the door for even greater innovation.

I didn't believe I was smarter or more talented than any of the captains who had come before me. If anything, I had less experience than a lot of guys who could have been chosen. I'd never coached anything in my life. At least some of the people in contention had managed Little League teams. My wife, Toni, and I have daughters. We were involved in dance recitals, not baseball games.

If I had anything going for me, it was that the players believed I was on their side. As a broadcaster, I had gone out of my way to make sure the players were the stars. My philosophy in the booth had always been to say less instead of more, to tell the viewer

something he didn't already know, and to make the players the heroes. That was why I never predicted a shot. "*I think he might be able to chip that one in, don't you, Roger?*" "*He sure could, Johnny.*"—chip shot goes in—"*Great call, Johnny.*" "*Thank you, Roger.*" I never wanted that to be me. My attitude was, the guy who chipped in deserved the praise, not the guy who predicted it. Players knew that about me, and they knew I was always on their side.

By the time our guys teed off on Friday morning of the 2008 Ryder Cup, every player had confidence in my confidence in him. They also knew they were in control of the outcome. I had control over the selection of some of the players, the pairings, the golf course setup, the uniforms, the meals, the team room, the practice round schedule, and the message I could deliver to our team. But the outcome was up to the players, eight guys who had earned their way into this pressure cooker and four others I had invited to join us. The players were the heroes. They were the guys under the spotlight, the guys who would forever have the won-lost numbers by their names, and the guys who would be remembered for hitting the shots and making the crucial putts. That is exactly the way it should be. The players did it, not the captain or any of his assistants.

I sat in my bright-red cart, knowing these were the greatest golfers in the world. We had done everything we could to create an environment where they could be their best. Our team was as prepared as they could possibly be when the bell rang. And I knew that the guys we had assembled would lay everything on the line for each other.

That's all I could ask.