

Golf and rugby added to Olympics

The Associated Press

Golf has a tee time for 2016, and Tiger Woods can hardly wait. The sport returns to the Olympics for the first time since 1904 amid the spectacular backdrop of Rio de Janeiro's sand and sea, giving Woods the chance to do something even the great Jack Nicklaus never did -- win Olympic gold.

Olympic officials had no sooner voted golf in -- along with rugby -- than Woods and his fellow players cheered their chance to finally compete on sport's biggest stage. They will compete for Olympic medals, but the greater promise is that the game catches on in countries where golfers are few and golf courses are even fewer.

"I think it's great for golf," Woods said from the Presidents Cup in San Francisco. "It's a perfect fit for the Olympics, and I think we are all looking forward to golf getting into the Olympics."

The vote for golf was expected, following a campaign by the sport's leaders to bring it back for the first time since George Lyon and the United States won gold medals at the Olympics in St. Louis. They promoted it as a way to bring a sport once reserved for the elite to the masses, even though it will add 120 men and women to a sports festival already considered bloated by some in the Olympic movement.

Nicklaus himself said Olympic gold would not trump the green jacket given the winner of the Masters or the claret jug awarded in the British Open, but would be seen as something hugely important in countries where the game now doesn't mean nearly as much.

"For most of the world it will be a new game, with a new goal to achieve an Olympic gold medal," Nicklaus said. "For a lot of the world, it's something that's unbelievably special as an opportunity."

Golf's boosters capped their push for inclusion with pitches by Ireland's Padraig Harrington, a three-time major championship winner, and Michelle Wie, who for several years was the world's best known female amateur player. Wie told the International Olympic Committee that putting golf in the games would give young girls everywhere something new to aspire to.

"I can dream about doing something that neither Tiger nor Ernie (Els) have ever done, and that is to make the final putt to win an Olympic gold medal," Wie said. "If this dream comes true, somewhere in the world there will be another 4-year-old who sees me on that podium and perhaps starts her own Olympic dream."

Golf was approved 63-27 with two abstentions, while rugby won near unanimous acclaim in an 81-8 vote with one abstention. They are the first sports added since triathlon and taekwondo joined the program for the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

While golf was backed by a major push that included leaders of the sport from around the world as well as top players, rugby got the nod after a campaign of its own to show off the sport to a wider audience. The vote to include rugby sevens featuring 12 men's and women's teams, though, was celebrated in a similar manner.

"We were ecstatic and wanted to jump on the table, but we sort of restrained ourselves," former New Zealand rugby great Jonah Lomu told *The Associated Press*. "It was just fantastic for the game."

Woods, whose dominance of golf has made him one of the most recognized athletes in the world, will be 40 when the sport returns in Rio under a traditional format of 72 holes of stroke play for fields of 60 men and 60 women. He grew up determined to chase -- and break -- the record of 18 major championships won by Nicklaus. There were no thoughts of Olympic glory because there was no Olympic glory to think of.

But Woods is excited about the chance to do something he never imagined, and so are his fellow players.

"I think it's awesome," Sean O'Hair said. "You're going to be able to play for your country at the Olympic level. I think it's huge for the game. I think it's great for the Olympics. You know, I don't see any negatives to it. I think it's fantastic."

Both golf and rugby had to make some concessions to win their respective vote. Golf promised the IOC it would not stage any other major championships during the Olympics, while the Rugby Sevens World Cup will be canceled.

The vote was a reversal of the IOC's decision four years ago to reject golf and rugby for the 2012 Olympics, and brings the number of summer Olympic sports back to 28. There have been two openings on the program since baseball and softball were dropped in 2005 for the 2012 London Games.

The two sports share an Olympic history of sorts, both making their debuts at the second modern games in Paris in 1900. Golf was played again only in 1904, while 15-a-side rugby was in three more games, the last the 1924 Paris Olympics.

"Time will show your decision (on the sports) was very wise," IOC president Jacques Rogge told delegates. Rogge won a vote of his own when he was elected unopposed to a final four-year term.

Delegates were more wary about golf than they were about rugby, largely because of golf's reputation as a sport played by rich people at private country clubs. Some IOC members questioned how it could be successful in most countries because of the high cost of playing it, while others pointed out that some top clubs -- including Augusta National -- do not allow women as members.

"There are some serious problems with some clubs where major events are held, in terms of discrimination," American member Anita DeFrantz said, urging the IOC to "avoid going down a road that may be harmful to our image."

In the end, though, the promise that adding golf to the games would make it more available to the masses won the day. Left unsaid was that marketing the sport to countries where it is not widely played -- China, for instance -- could lead to even bigger TV contracts for tournaments, higher purses for players, and more golf course developments.

"Anything that grows the game, gets more people playing the game and more people watching the game, impacts all of those things," PGA Tour commissioner Tim Finchem said.

New York Times, New York, Oct. 9th 2009, Sports, online.