

Money, money, money



James Drife

Sun City, scene of the 2010 SASOG Congress, is a long way from Celtic Manor in Wales. Both have great golf courses but their microclimates are different, especially in October. As I write, the finest golfers in the northern hemisphere have just spent a weekend at the Manor hoping that the rain would stop long enough for them to win the Ryder Cup, for which Europe and the USA compete biennially. For the first time in 85 years the match suffered a weather-induced over-run, forcing 35 000 spectators to throw a communal sickie in order to watch the nail-biting climax on Monday. The good news for the Americans was that Tiger Woods regained his form. The better news for the Europeans was that they won back the Cup at the second-last hole. It meant a lot to them. In Tuesday's papers their expressions in victory were quite ungolfer-like. They looked more like the All Blacks warming up against the Aussies.

It was great to see such passion among seasoned professionals. The Ryder Cup is one of the few golf fixtures that does not involve huge amounts of prize money. Most sportsmen regard playing for their country as the ultimate honour, but European golfers find representing their continent even more exciting. Graeme McDowell, an Irishman, said he felt much more nervous playing for his team on that weekend than he did in the US Open (which he had won in June, pocketing more than a million dollars). Here in England we took comfort from those sentiments, having endured the performance of our national soccer team in July's World Cup.

Oh, gosh! I'm so sorry ... I should have started off by thanking you for being such wonderful hosts. My apologies. Blame it on my butterfly attention span, or perhaps my brain cells still haven't recovered from the battering they took from all those vuvuzelas. Anyway, please accept my belated congratulations on making the world's second-greatest sporting event such a success. I know football is not your first love, but you did the world proud. It all looked terrific from where I was sitting – which, incidentally, was in a hotel in Central Asia, thanks to the World Health Organization. What an insight that gave me into the global appeal of the Finals. All along the Great Silk Road they now smile when you mention South Africa.

As I'm sure you recall, England scored in the fourth minute of their first match at Rustenburg. That moment of pleasure for us fans ... followed by what seemed a

lifetime of pain. After the team came home they were lacerated by our media as a bunch of wealthy layabouts, which was not really fair. Yes, top English players are paid up to £100 000 a week (*a week!*), but they had taken the World Cup seriously and they know they will never live it down. As the postmortem continues, the finger is now being pointed at the financial clout of the Premier League, whose contribution to Britain's balance of payments (over two billion euros a year) has earned it the Queen's Award for Enterprise. Like a Victorian mill-owner, the League pushes its young employees beyond their physical and mental limits. When the time comes to play for England, they have nothing left.

All of the above seems a far cry from the golf that is played on the municipal course opposite our house, or the football that materialises every Sunday in the big park down the road. I wonder if the youngsters practising their putting, or lining up for the 'Brazilian football academy', are doing it because they want to become millionaires or just for the fun of it? Perhaps they're not sure themselves. Only a few players are really driven. To be brutally honest (and this is just between us, OK?), this is why I don't do sport. If I can't be the best, why bother? I imagine that psychologists have a name for people like me. I'm sure that golfers do.

But there is a connection between amateur sport and money, and it's called charity. Britain loves to organise events where people dress up as chickens, dinosaurs, the Hunchback of Notre Dame – you name it – and run themselves into the ground to raise funds for good causes. One of the many perils of e-mail is that friends announce to everyone on their hard disk that they will be dressing up as Mary, Queen of Scots and running, say, the Aberdeen marathon in aid of St Columba's Home for Distressed Haggises. They get a lot of support, but rarely from me. I can't get my head around the paradox that all this charitable giving, and the League's extravagance, are happening while our government is taking a scythe to public spending. Yet no chickens will be running in aid of the National Health Service. Beats me.

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