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Aussie Rules

This time of year in golf conjures a number of thoughts. Here in the Met Area, we’re happily hauling our gear out of storage. As we shake off the rust, we’re filled with both optimism and dread over how our swings will feel to start the season. Among the world’s best, spring means a raft of events — last month’s World Golf Championships-CA Championship, The Masters, and the Players Championship — that boast truly international fields. With them come new faces and never-before-heard, hard-to-pronounce names. The usual suspects — or, lately, usual *suspect* — dominate headlines, but below the surface is something which might surprise you, as it did me.

That Americans are the most successful nationality on the PGA Tour in terms of victories shouldn’t be a huge shock. Even without Tiger Woods’s statistic-skewing contribution, that would still be the case. But sitting comfortably as the second winningest country among those represented on the PGA Tour over the last twenty years is... Australia.

Every year since 1988, at least one PGA Tour event has been won by a man from down under — 63 in all, including Wayne Grady at the 1989 Westchester Classic. This year alone, there are 25 Aussies on the PGA Tour. As of this writing, 12 are in the top 100. Three are in the top 20, including Doral winner Geoff Ogilvy. Think about names like Greg Norman, Steve Elkington and Adam Scott, and that doesn’t seem too surprising. But in another context, it’s as remarkable as what Tiger did on the 18th green to win the Arnold Palmer Invitational last month. Population-wise, Australia is not much bigger than Florida. That’s a lot of wins for a small country.

“Our tour doesn’t run long enough for us to be able to stay at home,” says PGA Tour member John Senden, an Aussie. Exclusive of co-sponsored events with other tours, the Australasian Tour stages only a handful of events. So they hit the road, with great success.

The nurturing environment at home also plays a big role in Australians’ on-course success. If you’ve ever been to Australia, you know it’s just “different” in so many wonderful ways, not the least of which is golf.

“Golf is very affordable in Australia,” says Stuart Appleby, an eight-time winner on the PGA Tour, where he has been a member since 1996. “The cost to be a member of a really nice country club in Australia is what people spend on monthly dues here (in America).”

Then there are the state-sponsored programs which identify skilled golfers at an early age and cultivate their talent. Appleby is a product of the Victoria Institute of Sport. So too are Aaron Baddeley and 2006 U.S. Open champion Geoff Ogilvy. But the disproportionate recent success of Aussie golfers can probably best be explained in just two words: Greg Norman.

“It’s a common thing to say,” says Senden, “but I think watching him as a young guy inspired us all.”

“I mean, to be number one in the world for six years and for him to be Australian,” says Appleby, “you take away Greg and I reckon you can dilute what’s (Australian) out here.”

Peter Thomson won five British Opens, but it might just as well have been 500. No one back home actually saw it happen. Norman’s success happened in the age of television.

“Obviously it feels great,” Norman told me. “But at the end of the day, it’s a unique situation because we’re from such a small country that we respect and follow all of our sportsmen. Whether it’s tennis or cricket or Aussie Rules football or swimming, we all try and emulate the success of others.”

You might be able to make the argument that, per capita, no country on earth has been more successful at the elite level of golf than has Australia. We spend so much time these days fixated on what or who in the game is “amazing,” while one of the more remarkable things is something we probably didn’t even realize. ■