

Mr. 125*By: Nathan Crace Date: October 25, 2006*

It's that time of year again. The leaves are turning color, the air a little crisper, tail gates are getting a work out at football stadiums across the country, and those at the bottom of the top 125 on the PGA Tour's official money list are playing every tournament they can—at least those with no other exemptions anyway. For those of you who don't know the rules, the nutshell version is that the top 125 on the end of the year money list get to keep their card for the next year. All others below that mark who don't have another type of exemption (recent winner, major champion within the past few years, etc.) have to qualify again at Tour Q-School. That's one reason you may have noticed many of the recognizable names from the Tour in the last ten years—who you don't see much on the regular Tour these days—are playing more Nationwide Tour events. They lost their Tour card and are trying to play their way back on the big Tour.

Flashback to the Southern Farm Bureau Classic at Annandale Country Club in Madison, Mississippi this fall. The eventual winner, D.J. Trahan, won a grueling sudden death playoff for his first Tour win and secured his card by moving into the top 125 (and by winning an event). Trahan was a much heralded rookie from Clemson who many expected to win many times by now and should have won at Greensboro in 2005. But for those of us on the outside of the ropes looking in, we don't realize how much more intense the pressure is inside those same ropes—especially for a young rookie trying to stay within them.

But Trahan is not the only story like this. Each year around this time, the Tour story lines are mostly about who is "on the bubble" of the top 125. And what Tiger is doing. Luckily for the journeymen on Tour—those who slug it out week in and week out coming close to winning or just collecting finishes as they work toward their dream—most of the big guns take some time off this time of the year to re-fuel for the Tour Championship. Even Tiger skipped the Funai Classic at Walt Disney World to re-charge the batteries.

Unlike a few years ago when Vijay Singh went on a tear at the end of the year winning nearly everything he looked at and capping off the best year of his career, there have been a number of younger (and not so young) guys breaking into the winner's circle and collecting enough official money to jump into the top 125. In addition to guys like Trahan, Tour veterans like Davis Love III (who won at Greensboro) have been taking advantage of the fall finish to line their pockets and soothe the worries about their cards. Love hasn't won in a while on Tour and missed the Ryder Cup team this year. He's extremely popular with the fans, a great player with a Major under his belt and a reservation for the hall of fame, but wins are wins and the Greensboro title must have been a relief for Love.

So fire up the TIVO and catch some of the more gritty golf of the year this season. You may not recognize all of the names, but there's no mistaking the pressure. A four-footer to win the Ryder Cup? That's nothing! How about a three-footer to keep your mortgage and your wife's SUV? As Lee Trevino once said, the most pressure you can experience on a golf course is a putt to win (or not lose) more money that you have in your pocket. Many of you reading this can relate on a smaller scale. And that's what makes this part of the Tour season so much fun to watch. See the underdog overcome and the guy who can't break through finally make it. Now those guys are good.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Association of America whose freelance "Lipouts" column appears in a number of regional and national golf publications. If you would like to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com. Copyright 2006.