**Home and Watson**

**At Hoylake the GB&I Walker Cup team will be captained by Craig Watson. Derek Lawrenson, golf correspondent of the Daily Mail, spoke with him.**

Craig Watson can’t hide his delight at being captain of Britain and Ireland for a Walker Cup to be staged at Royal Liverpool – but he’s equally pleased he won’t be at Hoylake as a player.

‘Can you imagine making your Walker Cup debut and being faced with that horrible opening tee shot?’ he says, laughing. ‘The second shot is not very attractive, either! That’s a hole for young nerves and I’ll be more than happy to sit on the sidelines and see how the finest young golfers from our shores and America cope with it.’

It proves a typical response from the personable, self-deprecating Scot whose love and enthusiasm for the historic links is palpably plain. ‘For me, without question, Hoylake is one of the best courses on the Open rota,’ he said. ‘I don’t think there’s a weak hole. I just love the fact it’s so fair, and it’s all there in front of you, bar a couple of blind tee shots.’

Watson played in two Amateur Championships at Hoylake. In 1995 he watched his Scottish amateur team mate Gordon Sherry claim the title, before reaching the last 16 himself in 2000.

‘I think it’s perfectly suited to match play,’ he said. ‘You’ve got that opening hole which is going to be won or lost in a lot of matches and then you’ve got two par fives close together near the end, where momentum can change quickly. It’s going to be perfect for the Walker Cup. I know as the home captain I have the chance to tweak the course if I want but I see no reason to do that. I’ll leave it to the club because they’ll know best on that one.’

Watson came from nowhere to make his sole appearance in the Walker Cup at Quaker Ridge in upstate New York in 1997. He wasn’t in any of the squads named in advance but made an unanswerable case for inclusion in the team itself by winning the Amateur Championship that year at Royal St George’s, where he beat a South African by the name of Trevor Immelman in the final. Eleven years later, Watson was cheering as loudly as anyone as the classy Immelman claimed the Masters at Augusta.

‘It’s pretty good to look back on and say you beat a major champion, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘Trevor was only 17 at the time he played me, so he didn’t know any better. I was so pleased for him when he won the green jacket, because then he didn’t have to look back on his career and think to himself: If only I’d won the Amateur…!’

Immelman wasn’t the only brilliant 17 year old that Watson encountered that year. A couple of months later, among his team mates at the Walker Cup, was the youngest player ever to compete in the contest...a certain Justin Rose.

‘He went on to have by far the most successful career of any player on either side, and I can’t stay that came as any surprise,’ said Watson. ‘Like Trevor, you could just tell. Justin had all the shots even then, and I’m so happy that he’s fulfilled all his potential and become such a credit to the British game.’

As for his own performance that week, Watson remembers it like it was yesterday, and offers reflections that stand as good advice to the competitors on both sides this time.

‘Do you know, I never imagined that I would ever play in a Walker Cup,’ he said. ‘I fast-tracked myself into the team with my Amateur win. I almost came through the back door. I was 31, and not good enough to turn pro, so I knew this was going to be the highlight. I remember telling myself to go and enjoy it and that’s exactly what I did. It was my first experience of a US Open-type set-up and I did pretty well, winning one of my singles and halving the other. The whole experience was just fantastic, even though we ended up getting trounced.’

In recent times, the Walker Cup has rather shadowed the Ryder Cup in terms of the home team largely holding the upper hand, with Britain and Ireland looking for a sixth home win out of the last seven to be staged.

‘I think there was a point, like the Ryder Cup, where it was far too one-sided to be completely compelling but there’s a lot more interest now it’s a more even contest,’ said Watson. ‘I think putting has a lot to do with the home side doing so well. I remember when I played, watching my putting stroke disintegrate on the lightning-fast greens, and for the Americans it’s the opposite problem when they come over here. It is a difficult adjustment.

‘As for this match, I’m very proud to have the chance to add to our recent record. I know I have huge shoes to fill after what Nigel Edwards did during his time as captain but I’ll give it my best. It’s such a huge thing for me, something I never expected.’

It will also be an emotional week for Watson, who should have been captain for the last match in Los Angeles. Four months before it was due to be staged, he discovered that his sister, Kirstie, had been given just four months to live, and he stood down.

‘She died on the day the team stepped on the plane,’ said Watson. ‘She was quite keen for me to go but it wouldn’t have been right.’

Kirstie will no doubt be in his thoughts when Watson takes a break from his job with the distribution arm of the Isle of Skye brewing company for a week he will never forget. Win or lose, you can be sure he will raise a glass.