

The recent success of Irish golf has helped turn Europe into a dominant force in the Ryder Cup.



# Irish eyes are smiling

With six Majors and a world No 1 in the last four years, there's no doubt that the island off the west coast of Great Britain is doing something right. **Richard Asher** ponders Ireland's recent success in the golfing world.

Exactly 100 years ago, George Graff Jr and Chauncey Olcott came out with a song called *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling*. Once sung in public by Ronald Reagan, you've probably heard it before.

It may be a century old, but that song made a shrewd point. The Irish are a cheerful lot at the best of times, and they're not particularly good at hiding it.

An Irishman trying not to smile is an awkward thing to behold. In golf, that good humour can be a problem. Because every golfer knows that the more you celebrate, the more the gods will be tempted to take you down a notch. And because golf traditionally demands modesty, even from a man playing like a deity.

Rory McIlroy knew this in last year's US Open. He had that tournament at his mercy all week. His golf ball, seemingly on a string from the get-go, granted his every wish. But he wouldn't tempt fate by overdoing the beaming grins. Keeping the glint out of his eye, though, was asking a little too much. Graff and Olcott had it right.

The rest of us could holler and cheer as we pleased, thankfully. As approach shot after approach shot rained down on the flags at Congressional Country Club, what spectator could suppress a grin at so wanton a display of accuracy? But then the camera would cut back to the lad from Holywood, Northern Ireland, and he'd look bashful about his latest wonder shot. You were lucky if you got a bemused frown under that Krusty the Clown mop. Even as his ball missed an ace by inches at the 10th in the final round, he kept a straight face, though the eyes – and a slight twitch of the mouth – betrayed otherwise.

As the Yankee-doodle crowds



Darren Clarke's victory in the 2011 Open Championship was swiftly followed by a few glasses of Guinness.

**"DUBLINER PADRAIG HARRINGTON KICKED OFF THE RECENT IRISH PARTY IN THE MAJORS. TWO OPENS AND A PGA PROVED BEYOND DOUBT THAT THE IRISH COULD SLAY GIANTS WITH THE BEST OF THEM, AND LAID THE WAY FOR DARREN AND THE MACS."**

chanted Ro-ry, Ro-ry, Ro-ry in the shadow of the nation's capital, it was striking just how they'd taken the curly 22-year-old from Europe to heart. Verbals directed at European players on American golf courses have not traditionally been of a sympathetic nature. But McIlroy, even though he'll be 'The Enemy' in the Ryder Cup later this year, has become the exception. The spectacularly public failure at Augusta helped endear him, and instantly made Mr Club Golfer his ally. His genial, positive reaction to it all did the rest. Youth-crazed America found itself willing this little Euro-kid to help himself to their national championship.

His nationality helped, of course. The Irish (north and south – let's not get political) have a way of endearing themselves to the world. Graeme McDowell had done it a year earlier in the same tournament, where the Pebble Beach galleries thought him a worthy kinda guy to win the US Open. Same thing at Royal St George's last year, when Darren Clarke stunned us all. The quintessential fun-loving, jocular Irishman was begrudged his Open win by absolutely nobody.

Of course, let's not forget that it was Dubliner Padraig Harrington who really kicked off the recent Irish party in the Majors. Two

Opens and a PGA in 2007-08 proved beyond doubt that the Irish could slay giants with the best of them, and laid the way for Darren and the Macs.

No question about it: Irish golf eyes have been glinting with glee of late. There's been every reason to whoop, holler and squeal with joy. Ireland has become a helpless overachiever in professional golf – and don't we South Africans know how good that feels!

While Clarke, Harrington and McDowell have certainly all struggled to maintain their Major-winning form – though Harrington's 61 in Florida last month might suggest better times are near – McIlroy seems set for a long spell at the pinnacle. Now that he's had a taste for No 1 in the world – and by the time you read this he may well have ascended the World Ranking to the top spot – heaven only knows how long he may entrench himself there, keeping Ireland proud.

Irish golfers are nothing if not characters. Few would accuse Clarke or McDowell of too many quiet nights in. Same goes for big John Daly, whose surname betrays ancestry from a certain green, soggy island.

McIlroy has a bit of showman in him too: think of his forthright television appearance as a wee nipper, or his recent spot of televised tennis with professional Maria Sharapova.

The Irish enjoy a little bit of fun, yet somehow do it without crossing the line into arrogance. As with the lilt, you need Irish DNA to pull this off convincingly. The truly laid-back approach (Harrington's arguably an exception) is also tough to mimic, and there may be some merit in the argument that this trait is an enormous boon in

## OTHER IRISH GREATS

**CHRISTY O'CONNOR SR**  
O'Connor was one of the best players in Europe from the mid-1950s into the 1970s, in a career that included 43 professional wins. He posted 10 top 10s in The Open, finishing second in 1965, behind Peter Thomson.

**DES SMYTH**  
Smyth was a solid player on the European Tour for many years, winning eight times. In his last European Tour win, in the 2001 Madeira Island Open, he broke the tour record for oldest winner. He was 48 at the time.

**RONAN RAFFERTY**  
Rafferty was a seven-time winner on the European Tour between 1989 and 1993, and also won five times on the Australasian Tour and topped the European Tour Order of Merit in 1989.

**EAMONN DARCY**  
Darcy won four times on the European Tour between 1977 and 1990, and claimed second- and third-place finishes on the moneylist during this period. He also played in three Ryder Cup teams.

big golf tournaments.

Yet there's more to it than just the national character, otherwise it wouldn't have taken until 2007 for the Major floodgates to open, if you'll pardon the pun.

Major wins were rare as beach weather in Galway until Harrington got going. Before that there had only been Fred Daly, who won The Open at Royal Liverpool in 1947, after which he reportedly announced that the Claret Jug would enjoy the 'change of air' on the Emerald Isle.

But the jug's holiday lasted only a year, after which came a whopping 59-year Major drought.

Still, there are a couple of factors that certainly played their part in building up golf in a country where strange sports like Gaelic football and hurling had long monopolised public interest.

One was Royal Portrush hosting The Open in 1951. Sadly, Ireland did not get a home winner as Englishman Max Faulkner took the Jug home from the classic Ulster links. But the staging of the tournament there surely flicked the golf switch for the generation ahead of some of today's more senior Irish stars.

The growth of the Ryder Cup also gave Ireland something to shout about in golf, more so once 'Ireland' was added to the 'Great Britain' team name for the 1973 matches. Considering that there had been at least one Irish player in every Ryder Cup since 1947 – and that Christy O'Connor Sr was about to start a 10th consecutive contest – it was about bloody time!

A small branding change it may have been for the team that would soon become Europe, but it was the start of an acknowledgment of Irish golf that culminated in The K Club hosting the matches in 2006. With Clarke, Harrington and Paul McGinley on the team, Europe swept to a record-equaling nine-point win.

But Ireland and the Ryder Cup were already inseparable by then, with four of its sons having scored the winning point for Europe. We all remember McDowell doing it last time out at Celtic Manor, but Eamonn Darcy (1987), Christy



O'Connor Jr (1989), Philip Walton (1995) and McGinley (2002) had already set some memorable, nerve-defying precedents.

Then there's the national open. Tournament promoters know only too well that success rides on the coat-tails of success, and the recent good work done by Irish golfers has coincided with the rise of the

Irish Open, a tournament that basically stopped happening for 25 years between 1950 and 1975. Now the only major professional event in the country, the home stars simply have to make the effort to play (despite a shrinking purse linked to Ireland's troubled economy), which in turn makes it a desirable one to watch and win.

Harrington was a popular home winner in 2007, and it certainly didn't hurt when local Shane Lowry created some indelible tournament legend by snatching victory as an amateur in 2009. Since 2010 the event has had a prime-time midsummer slot, which has also done its status no harm at all.

The Irish Open will play out

over Royal Portrush this year, in what promises to be one of the highlights of 2012. Royal Portrush is one of the top-rated links in the world, and it has the kind of ghosts money can't buy. Fred Daly was a member, and so too are Clarke, Harrington and McDowell. And McIlroy shot a celebrated 61 there aged 16, during the North of Ireland Amateur if you please.

There will be a huge sub-plot lurking behind proceedings in late June, in the shape of some R&A suits (possibly in plain clothes) scoping out the joint for its suitability as a modern-day Open venue. Few would argue that this neck of the woods thoroughly deserves to host the oldest Major,

and the golfing world will be delighted if and when the R&A decides to push the button.

Despite the cheer at pro level, it's not all rainbows and pots of gold for golf in Ireland. Few countries have experienced the boom-and-bust of the recession quite like the Green Isle.

After a frenzy of course-building between 1990 and 2010, when the number of 18-hole courses went up from 213 to 352, several now find themselves in administration. Ireland is great for courses per capita, but in the current climate the oversupply model isn't working. Unless you're planning a visit there: cut-price greenfees abound right now!

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- 1 Rumours abound regarding Royal Portrush's possible inclusion on The Open rota.
- 2 Irishman Padraig Harrington's two straight Major wins saw him elevated to the status of 'one of the greats'.
- 3 Even teetotaler Padraig Harrington could not resist the urge to turn the Claret Jug into a drinking vessel when he won The Open in 2007.
- 4 The Irish contingent in the 2010 Ryder Cup also included captain's assistants Paul McGinley (far left) and Darren Clarke (far right).

But none of this will stop the Irish from lighting up at the mention of the word 'McIlroy'. No words can capture this truth as well as another song, which emerged from Ireland in the days after Rory went to No 1.

You can check out the Corrigan Brothers' masterpiece at [www.compleatgolfer.co.za/article/mcilroy-song](http://www.compleatgolfer.co.za/article/mcilroy-song). 'With a smile on his face, he's golf wonder boy,' goes one line. It's hard to argue with that, wherever you're from. And with a smiling Irishman in the lyrics, it's a safe bet George and Chauncey wouldn't either. **CC**

**IRISH MAJOR WINNERS**

1947	Fred Daly	Open Championship	Royal Liverpool
2007	Padraig Harrington	Open Championship	Carnoustie
2008	Padraig Harrington	Open Championship	Royal Birkdale
2008	Padraig Harrington	US PGA Championship	Oakdale Hills
2010	Graeme McDowell	US Open	Pebble Beach
2011	Rory McIlroy	US Open	Congressional
2011	Darren Clarke	Open Championship	Royal St George's

**MAJOR WINNERS SINCE 2007**

USA	7
Ireland*	6
South Africa	3
Argentina	2
Germany	1
South Korea	1
*Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland combined	