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# PRESSURE PLAYER

*As his U.S. Ryder Cup berth shows,  
Kenny Perry excels when the heat is on*

BY DAVE HACKENBERG

**T**O FULLY APPRECIATE what Kenny Perry accomplished in 2008, we have to comprehend where he started.

Perry was 47 years old at the beginning of the year, almost three years removed from his last victory, far less removed from 2006 knee surgery, and he would have been easily forgiven had he opted to turn his attention not far down the road to the Champions Tour, that pot of gold at the end of pro golf's rainbow. Bide his time, stay fit, fine-tune his game and get ready to cash in.

But Perry had other ideas, goals that seemed realistic to him if to nobody else. The Ryder Cup would be played in September at Valhalla in his home state of Kentucky. And the 92nd-ranked player in the world wanted to be on the American team. Imagine that.

"I've always played well when my back's kind of been against the wall a little bit," Perry said.

That was certainly the case at the outset of '08. And then the darndest thing happened. One of the game's streakiest players started to heat up.

Perry made 13 straight cuts and had five top-20 finishes, including a tie for third at the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic and a runner-up finish at the AT&T Classic, where his playoff bid against Ryuji Imada went awry when his approach shot on the first extra hole hit a tree, ricocheted across the green and into a water hazard.



**“I THINK IT’S GOING TO BE DIFFICULT TO MAKE THE TEAM THIS YEAR AND NOT WIN A TOURNAMENT.”**

—2008 RYDER CUP CAPTAIN PAUL AZINGER

Kenny Perry laughs at where his ball came to rest after hitting from the sand on the third hole during the final round of the 2008 AT&T Classic. Perry went on to lose in a playoff to Ryuji Imada, but he knew his game was solid.

Despite that playoff loss, Perry was in a pretty good mood when he arrived at Muirfield Village Golf Club for the Memorial Tournament. The second-place finish at the AT&T moved him up the Ryder Cup points list and, he thought, made him a far more attractive candidate as a captain’s selection, if it came to that. Plus, some of his favorite events, the Memorial certainly being one of them, were on the horizon.

Then, before teeing it up in the first round of the Memorial, he read a newspaper article reporting on the previous day’s press conference held by U.S. Ryder Cup captain Paul Azinger.

“I think it’s going to be difficult to make the team this year and not win a tournament,” Azinger had said.

Is it possible to be discouraged and inspired at the same time?

Perry went out later that day and opened the 2008 Memorial with a 66, a round that was fashioned around an amazing six straight birdies on the back nine.

“I read the paper this morning [where] Paul said if you don’t win you’re not getting on [the team],” Perry said after his round. “That kind of bummed me out a little bit. It hurt me losing that playoff in Atlanta a couple weeks ago. I’ve got to somehow get in the winner’s circle again.”

He had been there before—twice, in fact—at Muirfield Village. His first PGA TOUR victory came at the 1991 Memorial with a playoff victory over Hale Irwin. A dozen years later, Perry forged a two-shot victory over runner-up Lee Janzen. All told, he had posted eight top-20 finishes in 19 previous appearances at Jack Nicklaus’ tournament in suburban Columbus.

“This place is special to me,” Perry said. “When you win your first event, it just has too many good memories, too many good vibes.”

There would be more to come.

And it would be just the start.

At the end of a difficult, weather-plagued, breezy weekend, Perry walked off the course Sunday evening with his third Memorial title, taking advantage of a slight meltdown by Mathew Goggin while carding a 33 on the front, making a pair of tremendous up-and-down pars early on the backside, and nailing it with a marvelous approach shot for a birdie on the 15th hole. His victory would tie Tiger Woods’ record of three wins at the Memorial (1999, 2000 and ’01).

Perry was back in the winner’s circle.

During a post-round press conference, a PGA TOUR official handed Nicklaus the updated Ryder Cup points list, and the Memorial’s host did the honors.

“You’re fifth on the list,” Nicklaus told Perry.

“Oh, sweet,” Perry said. “Closer to my goal.”

“You’re there,” Nicklaus assured him. “There won’t be any problem.”

Perry wasn’t about to take any chances.

Perry, as previously noted, has been notoriously streaky in his career. What followed, though, was something special, even by his standards.

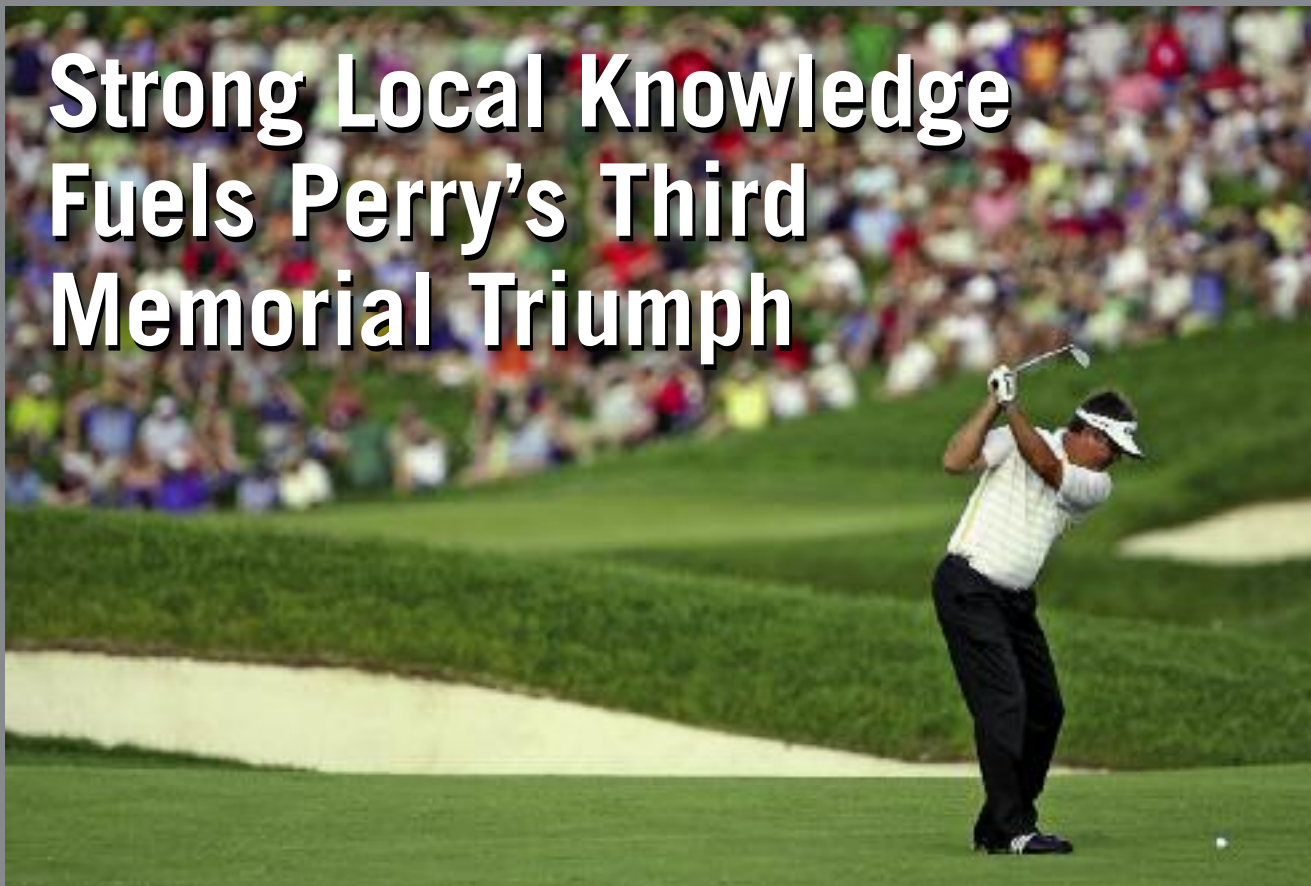
In three of his next four events, Perry would post a tie for sixth at the Travelers Championship and then post back-to-back victories at the Buick Open and the John Deere Classic.

The Ryder Cup was in the bag. Cue up, *My Old Kentucky Home*.

That home is in Franklin, a farming community of about 8,000, six stoplights from end to end, within shouting distance of the Kentucky-

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# Strong Local Knowledge Fuels Perry's Third Memorial Triumph



JERRY WISLER

**T**HE MOST IMPORTANT BIRDIE that Kenny Perry registered during the 2008 Memorial Tournament may have come on the 18th hole of the third round.

At the end of what he called “a big struggle” on a windy day that included a 2½-hour weather delay, Perry nudged a perfect approach shot close enough to take an aggressive run at the putt and remain within shouting distance of the leader, Mathew Goggin.

“He’s going to be a hard man to catch tomorrow,” said Perry, one of four players tied for second at 5-under 211, three strokes behind Goggin, after 54 holes. “I missed a gimme on

[No.] 16 for birdie and hit it close on 17 and missed the putt. So I needed to get a putt on that last hole just to get me within striking distance.”

A 2-over 74 won’t normally do that, not when the leader, who is your playing partner, is bettering par on a long, challenging day.

But Perry might have recalled his closing-round 63 just a year before at Muirfield Village Golf Club. He’d had a 63 on this same course 17 years earlier when making the Memorial his first-ever PGA TOUR win. And he’d carded a 65 at Muirfield in 2003 to jump-start a second Memorial victory.

“It’s definitely his tournament to win,” Perry said of Goggin. “But the guys at 3-under [or better] are still in this golf tournament. If Mathew has an off day tomorrow, it brings the whole field in. If he shoots 75, then the door’s wide open for everybody.”

Perry isn’t the type of guy to wish an opponent ill. In fact, walking off the 18th green he told Goggin he had “the look of a winner” and to just keep doing what he was doing.

“I don’t want to see anybody fail,” Perry said. “We’re all brothers out here.”



Above: Kenny Perry at the 2008 Memorial Tournament.

Left: Mathew Goggin of Australia hits from a bunker on No. 8 during the third round. Goggin led the Tournament by three strokes going into Sunday’s final round.

He was prescient nonetheless. Because Goggin would indeed struggle on Sunday, bogeying the first hole and playing the first 11 holes in 3-over en route to a 74.

And it was Perry who walked through the open door with a final-round 69 for a two-shot win over Goggin, Jerry Kelly, Justin Rose and Mike Weir. Pre-tournament favorites Phil Mickelson and Sergio Garcia, both coming off wins in their previous starts, never mounted challenges and posted over-par finishes.

Until the Sunday stumble, Goggin had owned at least a share of the lead for three straight days in his first Memorial start.

But it wasn't his first look at Muirfield Village; at least not all of it. Goggin had visited once before, in June, 1999, as a guest of Gary Nicklaus.

The native of Tasmania, an island state of Australia, will surely be back. But when it comes to serious knowledge of Muirfield Village, he ran into one of the gurus in Perry, who had six straight birdies late in his first round (four coming on putts of 19 feet or longer), coped better than most with a tough course setup featuring glass-like greens speed combined with weekend weather issues, and overcame that three-shot deficit entering the final round.

Perry's third victory came in his 20th Memorial appearance and he joined Tiger Woods as the Tournament's only three-time winners. The \$1,080,000 paycheck, the largest of his career, moved him past Woods as the leading money winner in Memorial history.

"Obviously, with a three-shot lead you sort of expect to win," Goggin said. "I was disappointed to not win. But Kenny's been playing so well for the last month. He's led every tournament at some stage. He's been the best player in the world for a month."

And he wasn't about to cool off for quite a while.

Perry's come-from-behind effort in the Memorial's final round included a 3-under 33 on the front nine, two marvelous up-and-down pars from beyond and above the greens at Nos. 12 and 14, and a sweet 5-wood approach at the 15th hole that produced a birdie to offset a subsequent bogey at No. 17. "I hit the prettiest 5-wood of my life on [No.] 15," Perry recalled. "That was money. That was butter. It was probably one of the greatest rounds I ever remember in a long time playing in tough conditions."

It didn't take long for Perry to up even that lofty assessment. The Kentuckian was a two-time winner in 2005, but in an effort to defend those championships at Bay Hill and Colonial, he probably rushed his return from knee surgery in 2006 and, by his own assessment, pull-hooked his game right into the doldrums.

His final-round 63 at the '07 Memorial was an early sign that he might be back in form. To further get over the hump, Perry set a goal of making the U.S. team for the Ryder Cup matches, to be played in September 2008, at Valhalla in his home state. Winning at Muirfield put him a giant step closer to that dream.

"With all the pressure I put on myself to make the Ryder Cup team, this may be the No. 1 round," Perry said after the Memorial win. "I knew I had to win golf tournaments. And to get it done, to have your back against the wall and actually do

it, this may be the greatest round. The magic always happens for me here. I just love this place. I had an unbelievable calmness ... just very relaxed and very focused."

Focus served another player well during Sunday's final round. Rocco Mediate, whose PGA TOUR career began in 1986, a year before Perry came on board, showed signs of overcoming recurrent back ailments with three top-10 finishes in 2007. At the '08 Memorial, he matched Perry's final-round 69 and quietly finished in sixth place.

Two weeks later, Mediate took a hobbling Woods 19 extra holes before losing in the U.S. Open at Torrey Pines, a play-off that just about everybody ranked as the most stirring in Open history.

Mediate was not the only veteran whose Memorial performance served as a precursor of what was yet to come. Perry's six weeks following his Memorial win would include wins at the Buick

Open and the John Deere Classic that made him, at age 47, the oldest player to win three times in one year in TOUR history. Of course, Perry made the Ryder Cup team and capped a magical year with a 2-1-1 record before the home folks as the U.S., beat the European team for the just the second time since 1993.

Not a bad year at all.

—DH



Mike Weir lines up a putt during Sunday's final round.





**BY MID-JULY, PERRY HAD BECOME THE OLDEST PLAYER IN PGA TOUR HISTORY TO WIN THREE TIMES IN THE SAME YEAR.**

Perry proudly displays his trophy from the 2008 John Deere Classic in Silvis, Ill.

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Tennessee border. Perry was born and raised there, about 120 miles from Louisville, where Valhalla is located.

It's where Perry and his family—he's married to his high school sweetheart, Sandy, and they have three kids—live in a big brick house that backs up to a creek rife with bass and catfish, near two garages filled with millions of dollars worth of vintage muscle cars, hot rods and motorcycles. For a man with few, if any, vices, Perry does like his cars and pickups, a blend of speed and power.

Perry could not always afford such toys. In the mid-1980s, after knocking around for several years on various mini-tours, Perry was considering other ways of making a living when a friend agreed to loan him \$5,000 for what was pretty much a final shot at the PGA TOUR's National Qualifying Tournament. The friend, like Sandy Perry, was a graduate of Lipscomb University in Nashville, and the deal was that if Perry passed Q-school, he would pledge five percent of his subsequent tournament winnings to Lipscomb.

Perry earned his TOUR card in 1986, and in the more than two decades since then he has

accumulated official earnings in excess of \$26 million. In return for that \$5,000 loan, Perry has provided \$1.3 million in scholarship money for Lipscomb students from Simpson County, where Franklin is located.

It is also where, in the mid-1990s, Perry took out a \$2.5 million loan to buy 140-plus acres and build Country Creek, an 18-hole public golf course in a county that did not have one. He designed it to be particularly enjoyable for mid- and high-handicappers and has kept the price affordable.

No wonder Perry, while more good ol' boy than royalty, is nonetheless beloved in Franklin. So no one there laughed in late 2007 when Perry, speaking at a local fund-raiser, said he was crafting his '08 schedule with only one thing in mind, making the Ryder Cup team.

And no one anywhere else was laughing, either, by mid-July, when Perry had become the oldest player in PGA TOUR history to win three times in the same year and had locked up a spot on the U.S. squad.

Some were criticizing, maybe, but they were not laughing.

Believe it or not, Perry took some grief by setting up a schedule that largely bypassed the major championships. (He did not qualify for an invitation to the Masters, declined to go through the qualifying process for the U.S. Open, and opted to honor his commitment to play at the U.S. Bank Championship in Milwaukee even after the Memorial win and other successes put him over the top for a berth in the British Open being played the same week. He did enter, as usual, the PGA Championship, but withdrew after one round because of a scratched cornea.)

"Not everybody's playing for majors," Perry explained.

No, Perry has always played the game to support his family, his hobbies, his charities and his golf course.

"My only goal is to survive out there, you know," he said.

In a lighter moment, while addressing the criticism of his schedule, Perry quipped that nobody had ever before cared when or where he played. Of course, Perry had never been the hottest golfer on the planet before. It went with the territory, perhaps.

With 2008 now in the rearview mirror, Perry is excited about his major championship opportunities in '09. In fact, he said his only remaining goal is to win one of them. He nearly did that at

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the Masters, in fact, losing in a playoff to Angel Cabrera. But last year at this time there was only one major event on his mind: the Ryder Cup.

He said he figured it would “define my career,” but there were concerns entering the September event at Valhalla. The streaky Perry had stopped streaking. After a stretch that saw him play 32 tournament rounds in a combined 81-under par, Perry had played 17 rounds in 17-over par entering the Ryder Cup.

Perry said he was fine and Azinger, for one, seemed to not be worried.

“I thought he actually played fairly well since he made the team,” Azinger said of his roster’s senior statesman. “But it’s difficult when you have a goal to make a Ryder Cup team and you win three tournaments. There can be a letdown—a natural letdown. I told him I would hope he wouldn’t have a letdown and would establish some more goals for himself.

“I feel there is going to be a lot of pressure on him, but if handled properly, he’ll direct that energy in the right way. I just hope he enjoys the experience,” Azinger said at the time.

**“I FIGURED THIS WAS GOING TO DEFINE MY CAREER. BUT YOU KNOW WHAT? IT MADE MY CAREER.”**

—KENNY PERRY ON HIS RYDER CUP EXPERIENCE

There was no way that would not be the case. First, it was the Ryder Cup, which has become one of the premier international events in all of sports. Secondly, it was a home game. And, finally, it was Valhalla, still a young course in terms of golf history, but a place where Perry already had a little history of his own. The first major championship ever contested at Nicklaus-designed Valhalla was the '96 PGA, and Perry walked off the 72nd hole leading by one shot and seemingly all but crowned. He was invited up to the CBS TV tower for an interview, and he stayed there for about 30 minutes, right up until Mark Brooks, playing in the final pairing, birdied No. 18 to force a sudden-death playoff.

With threatening weather nearby, Perry was hustled from the tower to the tee. He hit a dread-

A happy U.S. Ryder Cup Team after the closing ceremony, clockwise from top center: Captain Paul Azinger, Stewart Cink, J.B. Holmes, Chad Campbell, Asst. Captain Dave Stockton, Steve Stricker, Phil Mickelson, Asst. Captain Olin Browne, Justin Leonard, Anthony Kim, Ben Curtis, Jim Furyk, Boo Weekley, Asst. Captain Raymond Floyd, Hunter Mahan, and Kenny Perry.



**“I JUST CAN’T IMAGINE WHAT TIGER WOODS PUTS UP WITH ALL THE TIME, [BUT] FOR ONE WEEK OF MY LIFE, I FEEL LIKE HIM.”**

— KENNY PERRY

Perry shares his third Memorial Tournament victory with his son Justin, wife Sandy and daughter Lesslye.

ful drive and took five shots to find the green. The playoff was over almost before it started.

“Tough loss,” Perry said when asked to revisit it after last year’s victory at the Memorial. “I’ve always said that you can either go one way or the other. It can bother you so much ... it can make you fail, or it can make you stronger. I was not going to let that beat me. I was determined to get out there and win golf tournaments and forget about that day. I feel like that place owes me a little something.”

So, Kenny Perry returned to Valhalla, and on Tuesday of Ryder Cup week, the first practice day, he stepped out of the clubhouse and was treated like a rock star by tens of thousands of fellow Kentuckians.

“I just can’t imagine what Tiger Woods puts up with all the time,” Perry said, “[but] for one

week of my life, I feel like him.” Later in the week, he went out and played like him, too.

Perry and partner Jim Furyk halved an opening-day foursomes match with the European flagship team of Lee Westwood and Sergio Garcia as the U.S. stormed to a 5½-2½ Friday lead. In the Saturday morning foursomes, Perry and Furyk scored the only American win, beating Pádraig Harrington and Robert Karlsson, 3 and 1, to blunt any European momentum. In Sunday’s single match, Perry handled Henrik Stenson fairly easily, 3 and 2, adding fuel to the early fire as the Yanks poured it on for a decisive victory.

One headline writer said it was all “redneck, white and blue,” and Kenny Perry, a son of the South, the pride of Franklin, Ky., indeed played a huge role with two wins and 2½ points.

“It was the greatest experience of my life,” Perry said afterwards. “I mean, I figured this was going to define my career. But you know what? It made my career.”

And, appropriately, it all started with yet another win in one of his favorite tournaments, the Memorial, at one of his very favorite places, Muirfield Village Golf Club. MT

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