

Plane perk makes world of difference for John Deere Classic

It is tough enough having a tournament date that precedes the British Open. But when your event is nowhere near a major metropolitan city and six time zones removed from the United Kingdom, then it becomes all but impossible to think you will land any of the top names who will also be competing in the year's third major championship.

Unless you provide them a plane.



Wheels Up

Courtesy of John Deere Classic

How do you get a bunch of PGA pros to play your event the week before the British Open? The John Deere Classic figured it out by chartering MLW Air Boeing 767 with All First Class Seating.

Specifically, one with all first-class seats, plenty of space and nonstop service to Prestwick, Scotland, as soon as everyone can get loaded up and on board Sunday night in western Illinois.

The 767 aircraft is the one used for travel by the NBA's Dallas Mavericks, meaning it has plenty of legroom and headroom. "So this is awesome. It's nonstop. You can't lose your luggage. It's a nice plane, everybody has a good time. The food is awesome. It's kind of a no-brainer."

And that is what the John Deere Classic is doing. For the second straight year, the tournament in Silvis, Ill., is providing a 100-seat charter for anyone in this week's field who is also exempt for next week's British Open at Turnberry.

"It's made all the difference in the world for us," said John Deere Classic tournament director Clair Peterson, who said 22 players in the field this week have qualified for the British Open. "What it's done is allowed us to lock in our field much earlier and allow us to talk about the marquee guys in our field much earlier. They know they can do both -- play in the John Deere and still get to the British. We'll have them in Prestwick [about a 40-minute drive from Turnberry] by 10 a.m. Monday.

"We've had a couple of examples where it has really made a difference. Lucas Glover was on the plane last year and was quick to answer everyone's questions. And his plans didn't change once he won the U.S. Open. When David Toms got into the British after the Byron Nelson. ... in the old days, he would have had second thoughts about the John Deere. But he's still in our field.

"It has really allowed us not to completely eliminate the hurdle of our date, but it makes it plausible for guys to get over there. In fact, we've talked about this being an advantage with this charter."

The players are not getting a free ride, although the \$1,250 donation they are being asked to make to the tournament's charity fund is far less than it would cost for first-class airfare to Europe. Each player is allowed to secure three seats, and can request more if space is available. Another perk: It is almost impossible to secure a nonstop flight to Scotland from anywhere but the East Coast.

It didn't take Mark Calcavecchia long to see the benefits of such an arrangement. Calc, who is celebrating the 20th anniversary of his 1989 British title at Royal Troon, had a nightmare trip to Carnoustie two years ago.

"None of my stuff showed up until Wednesday," Calcavecchia said. "Clubs, clothes, nothing. Absolutely zero. I had to go find some clothes. Not that I'm hugely fat, but when you're looking for double XL stuff over in Scotland, you'd think there were no fat guys anywhere near there. It was a struggle to find something to wear.



Zack Johnson, right, was among many players who flew from the John Deere Classic to the British Open on a plane chartered by the PGA event last year.

But it doesn't come cheap. Peterson said the cost to the tournament is \$300,000 give or take, depending on the price of fuel. It would be more were it not for the fact that the RBC Canadian Open uses the same plane to charter players from the British Open to Canada on the Sunday night after the Open Championship, using a similar arrangement.

Two years ago, Peterson said that only seven players in the John Deere field went to the British Open. The hassles can be just too numerous. Unless a player can get out of the Quad City International Airport on Sunday afternoon to make a connection to the U.K. on Sunday night, he has to wait until Monday and won't get to the tournament until Tuesday.

Among those taking advantage of the charter flight are Chad Campbell, David Duval, Charles Howell III, Zach Johnson, Tom Lehman, Davis Love III, Brandt Snedeker and Steve Stricker.

"It's been worth every penny we invested in it," Peterson said. "I guess we never intended to break even. We felt it was a way for us to invest in our event. We have one of the smaller purses on tour. We figured we'd spend a little extra money and provide a real benefit to a large number of players. And the request for a charity donation just seemed reasonable and one that would help reduce our costs some."

Last year the tournament asked for \$1,000 per seat and everyone obliged. In fact, Duval -- who used five seats, meaning a \$5,000 donation -- kicked in \$7,500.

"It's probably the best money we've spent because of our date. We can't change that," Peterson said. "But we can change the experience, what players have to go through to get there."



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