

AP PHOTO

Against a backdrop of empty seats, Team USA second baseman Chase Utley reacts to a popup he missed during a World Baseball Classic game against South Korea on Monday at Angel Stadium in Anaheim, Calif.

Baseball classic meaningful for some, not others

The worst thing about the World Baseball Classic, besides the incomprehensible tiebreaker system, has always been its timing. Baseball simply isn't supposed to mean this much in March. Actually, it doesn't seem to mean that much to the U.S. team, which sleepwalked its way through a loss Monday night to South Korea and now must rely on Roger Clemens and some luck to stave off elimination.

COLUMN

And it still doesn't mean that much to most Americans, if the crowds in Anaheim the past few nights were any indication. The Angels draw more for exhibition games against the Dodgers than the best of the United States did for games against Japan and South Korea.

But in places where they might root for the Yankees and not the Yanks, this is the Olympics on steroids. There, baseball's first real stab at an international series has taken on October-like proportions.

Don't think Fidel isn't tuning in somewhere in Havana? Sure he was when his team pulled a Barry Bonds, refusing to talk to the media after its loss to the Dominican Republic on Monday and anti-Castro protesters scuffled in the stands.

And how about Japan, where the outrage over a reversed call that probably cost their team its game against the United States on Sunday is so great that the prime minister even felt the need to get involved.

"It clearly looked like we were going to win," Junichiro Koizumi said. "It's a shame to lose on such a strange call."

While the Japanese try to figure out a new definition for the word "homer," other countries are showing America that, while baseball may be its national pastime, it doesn't own the game anymore. They're ecstatic in Puerto Rico, where the games at Hiram



Tim Dahlberg

Bithorn Stadium have been the most festive of all. The Dominican Republic may be mired in poverty, but the nation will have plenty to celebrate if its talented team makes it to San Diego.

If a team of Dominican superstars playing Puerto Rico's best before a noisy, flag-waving crowd in San Juan doesn't do it for you, then you're one of those fans who goes to Milwaukee Brewers games to cheer for the sausage races.

And what about South Korea? Wasn't this just a team with a couple of marginal major-league pitchers and a first baseman even the Dodgers didn't see as an everyday player?

That same team earned a surprisingly easy 7-3 win Monday night against a U.S. team that has played, so far, as if it's still the first week of spring training.

They may not be dancing in the streets in Seoul, but judging from South Korean manager Kim In-sik's reaction, his countrymen have to be breaking out some celebratory kimchee after beating the United States at its own game.

"Something happened (Monday) which nobody could believe," Kim said. "This is a collection of all the best of the major-league players. It's very difficult to believe what happened."

The timing of the tournament isn't ideal, of course, but options are limited. And when it returns in three years, maybe American players might have a better idea how to get prepared early enough for it.

Tim Dahlberg is a national sports columnist for the Associated Press. Send comments to tdahlberg@ap.org.

Not playing like rookies

Colorful first-year golfers impressing veterans on PGA Tour

By DOUG FERGUSON
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ORLANDO, Fla.

Rookies are becoming quite the rage in golf during the first two months of the season, a surprise in only one aspect.

The most compelling rookies are on the PGA Tour, not the LPGA.

David Toms learned about them quickly. Already a winner at the Sony Open, he was in contention two weeks later at the FBR Open, only three shots out of the lead going into the final round.

"I was there with a chance to win," he said. "I wasn't playing against Tiger. I was playing against Holmes and Villegas and some young guys. I felt like I was going to play well that day. I just didn't perform."

One of the youngsters to whom he referred was J.B. Holmes, a 23-year-old rookie from Kentucky who overpowered the TPC of Scottsdale, Ariz., wore out his wedge and had a superb week with his putter. That's usually an unbeatable combination, and it sent Holmes to a seven-shot victory.

The other rookie was Camilo Villegas, a 24-year-old from Colombia who looks like he belongs in one of those men's perfume ads found in fashion magazines.

Villegas was noticed early by playing with Michelle Wie in his 2006 debut at the Sony Open, shooting a 64 in the second round despite a hangnail so painful he nearly withdrew.

He tied for second in Phoenix, then dazzled at Doral with his natty attire (all white one day, orange shoes the next) and dynamic game to finish one shot behind Tiger Woods.

Fans are paying attention to the rookies for various reasons. Holmes was the first player in



AP PHOTO

Camilo Villegas of Colombia lines up a putt on the second green during the first round of the Ford Championship at Doral in Doral, Fla., on March 2.

23 years to go from college to medalist at Q-school, with a stop in Chicago along the way to help the United States win back the Walker Cup.

He wears a black glove, closes his eyes and recites a Bible verse to focus, then shows no mercy on the golf ball. He is not flashy or full of himself.

Villegas is all style, from his Johan Lindeberg wardrobe to his Cirque du Soleil style of reading putts. He flexes his right foot under his body to go horizontal, almost like he's doing a push-up, to get a level look at the break in the green. It works for him, even if the putting stroke has looked shaky at times.

The best measure is their results.

Holmes already has locked up a two-year exemption by winning in Phoenix, and at No. 10 on the money list, he has a good chance of qualifying for the Masters.

"I like his game; I really do," Brad Faxon said with an appreciative smile. "He's going to be good for the tour."

Faxon got a close look at Rivi-

era when they were grouped together the first two days.

Holmes wasn't at his best on the greens, although his game got Faxon's attention. The eye-opener came on the par-4 fifth hole, where most players hit 3-wood or a hybrid to keep it short of a steep hill that separates the fairway.

Holmes hit driver. "It's soaking wet, and he hit it down the fairway at the bottom of the hill," Faxon said. "And it backed up."

On the strength of his two runner-up finishes, Villegas already has earned \$850,831 and is 14th on the money list. Not only is he assured of keeping his card, the immediate goal for most rookies, he has an outside chance of getting into The Players Championship and perhaps the Masters.

"He's an incredible player and very likely to win this year, and he'll be a strong presence," Phil Mickelson said.

They are the two that stand out.

For sheer entertainment value, meet 27-year-old Bubba Watson, he of the hot pink shaft in his driver and tee shots that don't just

go to the moon, they orbit.

Watson has plenty of showmanship. At Doral, he was launching drives over the back end of the range, over buildings that house Jim McLean's golf school and into a pond on the other side that no one knew was there. Then he would stop and gaze around to see who was watching.

Steve Williams was. Woods' caddie sat on a cooler witnessing the power display, shaking his head in disbelief.

Watson is first in driving distance and dead last in driving accuracy, although he shows some restraint on the golf course.

He made it through Tucson without a bogey, the first player without a bogey in a 72-hole PGA Tour event since 1974.

Watson tied for third that week, and coupled with his fourth-place showing at the Sony Open, has \$424,112 (No. 34 on the money list) and is well on his way to keeping his card.

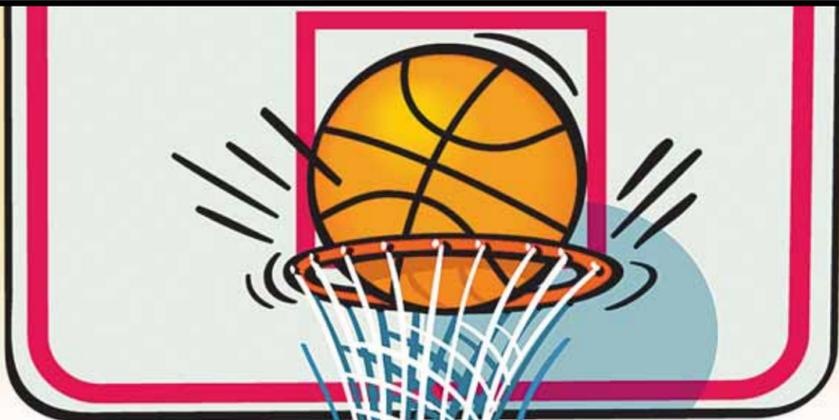
"I see success as when you start winning," Watson said. "Right now, I'm a nobody in the golfing industry because I haven't won. Third place isn't looked upon highly unless you're Michelle Wie."

Two months don't make a season. Success is better measured over the course of the season and its weekly grind.

Even so, these three players are part of a broader trend geared toward youth.

Four of the top 10 players on the money list are in their 20s, led by 29-year-old Rory Sabbatini and 28-year-old Geoff Ogilvy, the Aussie who recently captured his first World Golf Championship. Honda Classic winner Luke Donald is 28, while Holmes won't turn 24 until the end of April.

Two others in the top 10, Woods (30) and Chad Campbell (31), can hardly be considered ancient.



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