

When It Comes to Points, It's Finishing First That Counts

By MARK SWEENEY

THE FedEx Cup, the PGA Tour's idea of a season-ending playoff, is unlike most sports' play-offs, where to advance you simply have to keep winning. The road to victory in the FedEx Cup is not quite so clear-cut.

In theory, the winner should be the player who has finished in the top 10 for the regular season, then performs well most consistently during the cup's four tournaments.

If a top-10 player finished second in each event, he would have a 99 percent chance of winning — but no player except Tiger Woods has shown he can get four top-10 finishes in a row.

So, in practice, winning at least one of the four tournaments is crucial. For instance, if Kenny Perry, the top-ranked player going into the first tournament, won one event, his chance of winning the cup would jump to about 50 percent, depending on whether another top-10 player, like Phil Mickelson, also won one of the tournaments.

If a player like Perry or Mickelson won two of the tournaments, he would be virtually assured of winning the cup.

A first-place finish in each of the first three tournaments is worth 11,000 points, while second place receives 7,400

If a top-ranked player wins one event, his chance of winning the cup is about 50 percent.

and third place 5,400; in the final tournament, the awards are 12,500, 8,500 and 6,000 points, respectively.

So the FedEx Cup is partly about playing at a consistently high level and partly about reaching the highest level once or twice. Neither is a given for most players, because golf performance is so streaky (unless you are Woods, whose streaks seem to last forever).

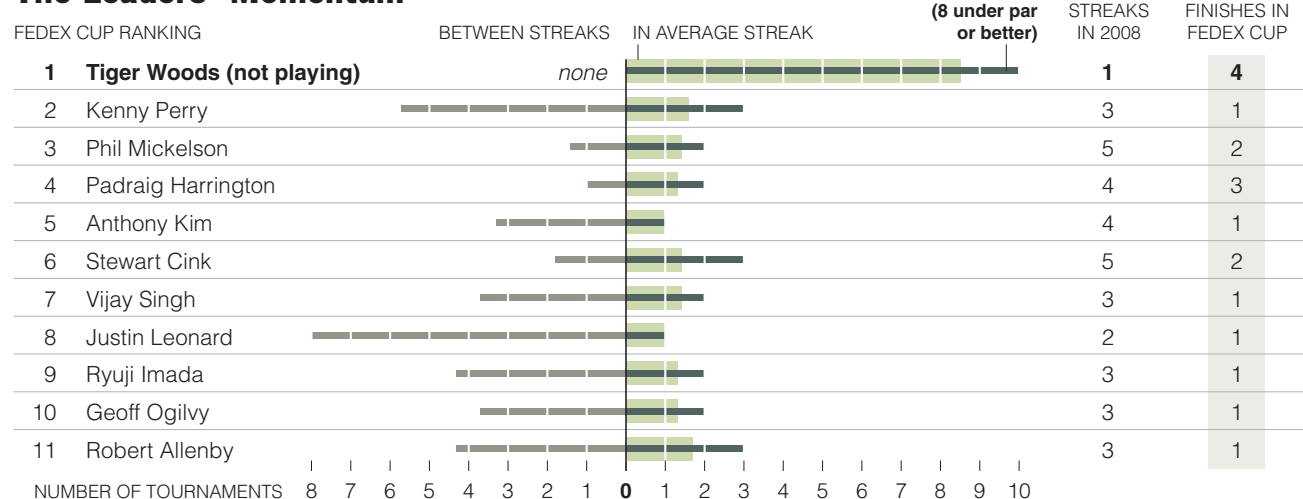
Mark Sweeney does statistical analysis for some PGA Tour players.



NICOLE BENVIGNO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

AN EASY PUTT? The 14th hole at Ridgewood, where a win would be a major step toward capturing the FedEx Cup.

The Leaders' Momentum



*Average from beginning of 2007 through Aug. 17, 2008

THE NEW YORK TIMES

With Woods recuperating from knee surgery, who might be likely to hoist the cup a month from now? Who might combine consistent performance and a high likelihood of winning one or two of the tournaments?

As the chart above makes clear, the players most likely to have at least two

top-10 finishes and at least one win during a four-tournament stretch are Padraig Harrington, Mickelson and Stewart Cink.

The average PGA Tour player earns 80 percent of his prize money in about 35 percent of the tournaments he plays, when motion, timing and temperament

mesh to yield multiple consecutive scores under par. So what we really want to know is this: How many consecutive weeks are players able to maintain winning scores, and how often can they have such streaks?

The chart shows in how many tournaments the top 10 FedEx Cup players

typically maintain scoring streaks and how often these streaks occur.

I'll define a scoring streak as eight under par for the tournament, after adjustments for course difficulty. Eight under will usually guarantee a top-10 finish. Statistical analysis shows that the average scoring streak lasts only 1.2 tournaments, though top players (Woods is again the exception) can occasionally extend it to three tournaments.

Most players seem to have a limit on how many consecutive low rounds they can post, so the Ryder Cup could have a large impact on the FedEx Cup series, as it occurs just before the final event, the Tour Championship.

Top players tend to have a cycle to their streaks, and players who perform well at the Ryder Cup are less likely to perform well at the Tour Championship.

For example, Vijay Singh and Mickelson were overdue for streaks heading into the W.G.C.-Bridgestone Invitational, which began July 31, and they finished first and fourth.

Perry, Anthony Kim and Harrington were overdue — that is, their streaks had already extended the expected amount of time, and they were due for a small slump. Each finished out of the top 10, with Perry, the hottest

Statistical analysis shows that the average scoring streak lasts only 1.2 tournaments.

player on Tour in July, finishing 66th.

Harrington was due for a rebound the following week at the P.G.A. Championship, and he indeed won again. Sergio Garcia finished second, after a two-tournament slump.

Harrington and Garcia will play for Europe in the Ryder Cup; Mickelson, Cink, Perry and Kim have been named to the American team. Let's see if the Ryder Cup winners go to the Tour Championship with a winning hangover.