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FEDEX CUP PLAYOFFS: SOME RIPS, PLENTY OF RICHES

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JERSEY CITY, N.J. (AP) -- Jordan Spieth used words like "incredible" and "amazing" to describe Liberty National Golf Club.

He can be forgiven. He's only 20.

Spieth wasn't a member of any tour at the start of the year, and now he's taking part in the financial windfall known as the FedEx Cup playoffs. He has only been a full PGA Tour member for five weeks, not nearly long enough to learn how to complain.

No one used words like that when The Barclays was held at Liberty National four years ago.

Tiger Woods said it was "interesting," a description that was subject to interpretation, though no one needed an interpreter. One player said the front nine didn't return to the clubhouse for fear no one would play the back nine. A caddie said golf course designers Bob Cupp and Tom Kite ruined a perfectly good landfill. And the jokes went on. It almost became a sport in itself, seeing who could deliver the best one-liner.



AP Photo/Mel Evans

No doubt, there were awkward sight lines off the tee to tight landing areas, and it didn't help that the rough was close to 4 inches. The slopes on some of the greens were severe and didn't hold shots. It needed some work, and billionaire club chairman Paul Fireman paid for them out of his own pocket. More on that later.

Lost amid the criticism of Liberty National was that it produced the best tournament of the 2009 playoff season. Heath Slocum won with a 20-foot par on the final hole, and while he remains the lowest-ranked player to win a playoff event at No. 124, the real measure was who he beat by one shot - Woods, Steve Stricker, Ernie Els and Padraig Harrington.

Also overlooked was the history and location of Liberty National. Fireman developed the course on the site of a former landfill, and no other golf course screams out, "New York, New York" better. It sits on the shore of the Hudson River across from Lower Manhattan, so close to the Statue of Liberty that she looks as if she's holding one of those "Quiet, Please" signs. Dozens of players have been posting photos on Twitter of the views, from either the course or the water taxi over to Manhattan.

But there's a bigger picture.

The Barclays is the start of a four-tournament series with a total of \$67 million in prize and bonus money - \$8 million purses at each FedEx Cup playoff event, and \$35 million in bonus money, with \$10 million to the winner.

The greens were too severe? The course looked contrived? Really?

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That's what annoyed Cristie Kerr.

The two-time LPGA major winner is a member at Liberty National, and she had heard enough. Kerr ran into a couple of players - Woods included - last year during a charity event and told them they weren't giving the course a chance.

"I talked to a couple of guys about how lucky they are to play on this stage, and to have a guy like Paul Fireman who will spend any amount of money to build the best course he can," Kerr said Sunday evening in Colorado. "It didn't deserve to be beat up like that. They should be grateful to be there. For us women, we struggle to get sponsors. So it's tough to hear. I think they respect me and respect what I was saying. And I know a couple of guys apologized to the Firemans."

Fireman said Woods approached him at the Deutsche Bank Championship last year and they had a nice conversation. He said Woods had heard about the changes to the golf course and looked forward to playing.

"Sometimes," Kerr said, "you can get a little big for your britches. They just need to be thankful for the stage, for the money they play for and the TV coverage they get, and all the other things that come along that they get to do."

She might have been referring to the rows of black BMW courtesy cars outside the clubhouse.

Fireman heard the good and the bad from four years ago - "It wasn't that bad, but it definitely had a tone," he said - and instead of taking it personally, he took action. Five greens were rebuilt (the 12th green was rebuilt three times until they got it right). Others had the slopes significantly reduced. The landing areas were widened on nearly every hole. And the 18th green was moved some 20 yards closer to allow for better staging.

He paid for the changes himself.

"The most important thing is the course will show well," Fireman said. "You can make it as tough as you want. We made it easier - not easy, but easier. My members love it, and I think I should worry about that first. I think we've done a great job. We've done everything we can do."

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Phil Mickelson also is a member, and Fireman leaned on him for advice. Mickelson's philosophy is to at least give players a shot at the green, even if they get into more trouble trying. His recommendation was largely about how to set up the course.

"What I said to Paul was if you were to play Augusta National and have 4-inch rough, you'd be miserable and the beauty of Augusta National would not come out," Mickelson said after an 18-hole practice round Tuesday. "I felt that way about Liberty National. If you get rid of the rough and put the first cut in there, you always have a shot. Since he's done that, it has made Liberty National play so good."

Mickelson said some of the complaints from 2009 were valid, "but nobody articulated it well at the time. They just made the claim it was too hard, too severe."

It's a different golf course. The reviews have been far more positive this week. The sights are as spectacular as ever.

The one thing that hasn't changed is that the players are still competing for an insane amount of money. This is no time to complain. It wasn't then, either.