



## Is the World Catching Up to the PGA Tour? Or Just the Math?

*A look at how the Official World Golf Ranking hurts American players*

by Ryan Ballengee

This week at the WGC CA Championship, Sergio Garcia can become the number one ranked player in the world if he wins at Doral and Tiger Woods finishes worse than 27<sup>th</sup> place. He would become the first European since Nick Faldo in 1995 to own the top spot in golf's world ranking system.



Just a few weeks ago, there was some commentary made about the bizarre field makeup of the Accenture Match Play Championship. Brendan Jones was the 64<sup>th</sup> player in the field despite not being able to hold onto his PGA Tour card in the prior season. Currently ranked 66<sup>th</sup> in the world, Jones faced Tiger Woods admirably in Woods' return to the game.

These events – among other anomalies – have caused some talk among players and media about the bias of the Official World Golf Ranking against American players. The problem for players and media both is how to explain the Official World Golf Ranking, what its bias is, and how it has an impact on the sport.

### A BRIEF HISTORY

The Official World Golf Rankings were originally developed by IMG founder Mark McCormack in 1968. Then simply called the World Golf Ranking, McCormack used his system in an attempt to prove that his clients were, in fact, the best in the world – not just on the Tours in which they played.

McCormack was consulted by the Royal and Ancient in 1985 to create an official system of ranking players. The R&A was looking for a way to quantify the value of players that did not play on a single tour, or played on tours with deeper or weaker talent than others. The first official ranking came out just before the 1986 Masters and pegged Bernhard Langer as the best player in the world at that time.

The PGA Tour adopted the rankings in 1990, which were known as the Sony Rankings at the time. In 1997, prior to the introduction of the World Golf Championships, the rankings were adopted by the new Federation of PGA Tours which co-sanction the series today. At that time, the rankings were renamed to what they are known as today.

Since that initial ranking in 1986, the method of calculating the rankings has changed significantly. There are two sets of calculations that make up the Official World Golf Ranking. The first is determining how many Ranking Points are given to a particular sanctioned money event. The second is figuring out how those points are distributed to players over a two year period.

### HOW POINTS ARE ASSIGNED TO EVENTS

Official events from the six tours that make up the Federation of PGA Tours, as well as the Canadian, Nationwide, and European Challenge Tours can award World Ranking Points. How many points that are awarded and their distribution among the field is determined by how an event is rated.

An event is rated based upon two factors. The first factor is based on the Official World Golf Ranking of the players in the field. Each player in a tournament field that is currently ranked in the top 200 of the current Official World Golf Ranking is given a Rating Value based on their position on the list. For example, every time Tiger Woods (the #1 player) enters a field, the tournament gets 45 rating value points. This goes all the way down to the 200<sup>th</sup> ranked player in the world who gets 1 rating value point. Then, the rating value points of all of the players in the field are summed up to get the total rating value.

Then, there is the second factor of Home Tour Rating Value points. This is a piece of the calculation added in 2001. What it attempts to do is reward events that have the best players from the host tour in the field. It awards additional Rating Value points to a tournament for every player in the tournament field that was in the top 30 of the host tour's money list during the prior season. If the money list or order or merit winner from the prior season of the host tour is in the field, he gets an extra eight Rating Value points for the event. The 16<sup>th</sup> through 30<sup>th</sup> players on last season's host tour money list would add 1 point.

	Tournament A	Tournament B	Tournament C
<b>Total Rating Value Points</b>	100	400	800
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Place World Ranking Pts</b>	24	54	76
<b># of Players Awarded Points</b>	27	52	59

These two numbers are added together to give the total Rating Value Points for an event. With that number, the tournament then awards World Ranking Points based upon the range in which its Rating Value Points falls. The more Rating Value Points a tournament has, then the higher number of World Ranking Points it can award and the higher number of players to whom it can award points. There are minimums for each tour that is recognized by the Official World Golf Ranking. Also, the major championships, World Golf Championships, and specific marquee events on the major tours have specific World Ranking Point minimums.

#### HOW POINTS ARE EARNED BY PLAYERS

The Official World Golf Ranking rates players over a rolling two year, or 104 week, period of time. Players earn points for each event that they participate in where they finish in a position that earns World Ranking Points. The points are then valued by a "time factor" so as to place more importance on recent performance. Points that are earned in the most recent 13 week period retain their full value as when they were earned. For example, if Sergio Garcia wins the CA Championship this week, he will earn somewhere around 70 World Ranking points. Two months from now, that win will still be worth 70 points in the calculation to determine his ranking.

I Earned 70 Points __ Weeks Ago...	They're Now Worth __ Points
5	70
30	57.07
70	26.63

After 13 weeks, though, points earned are multiplied by a factor less than one to indicate the diminishing value of those points. That time factor is somewhere between 1 and 0 and gets closer to zero after each week of the two year rolling period. Eventually, Sergio's hypothetically win will be worth just a small fraction of the original 70 points that he earned.

To determine a player's ranking, the total number of World Ranking points – at their current values – are summed and then divided by the total number of events that they played over the two year period. That number is the weighted average number of points that a player has earned for each event. The player with the highest weight average is the top ranked player in the world.

It seems pretty simple, right? Unfortunately, there are some clear distortions in the way that the rankings are calculated that have a lasting negative impact on the PGA Tour and American players.

## THE BIAS OF THE RANKINGS

### *Home Tour Rating Value Points*

The biggest bias of the Official World Golf Ranking stems from the concept of Home Tour Rating Value Points. There is no correlation between Official World Golf Rankings and Home Tour Rating Value Points. In other words, if the money list winner from a tour in the prior season is not in the top 200 of the OWGR, but is in the field on his home tour, then an event earns an extra eight points toward its Rating Value.

This may be an extreme example, but consider the impact of this truth on an Asian Tour event. Take an event like the Barclays Singapore Open. This event is sanctioned by the Asian Tour and has a prize pool of around \$5 million. It is contested after the PGA Tour season ends and the finale of the European Tour's biggest events. Because the sponsor pays generous appearance fees and the high purse, a number of world class players enter the field. This increases the Rating Value points like it should.

But, it is also a full field Asian Tour event. This means that almost all of the top 30 on the Asian Tour's money list from last season are in the event as well. In other words, the event gets bonus Rating Value points because of the presence of the best that the Asian Tour has to offer. If an Asian Tour player manages to sneak out a win against better competition, they reap an extra benefit in terms of World Ranking Points. Simultaneously, the imported stars from other tours can earn more points than they would otherwise if they were basically facing the same competition on their home tour.

In other words, it is to the benefit of everyone involved to play the event. The better players get to play for around the same World Ranking Points that they usually would and get to face weaker competition. The home tour players win because they get bonus ranking points from the presence of their own best players and the world's best. The event is overvalued.

A prime example is the aforementioned Brendan Jones. Playing primarily in Japan last year, he finished in the top 40 in nine of 10 events he played there. In other words, he earned at least 2.25 World Ranking Points for each of those 9 starts while playing against weaker competition. That is only one point less than what is awarded to a 10<sup>th</sup> place finisher in the weakest of PGA Tour events. Add that up over time, and Brendan Jones found himself playing Tiger Woods.

This kind of thing does not happen in a vacuum and can add up significantly over a two year period. Even more than that, this creates an unending cycle of inflated points. Since lower rated players get inflated rankings by participating in these events, the World Ranking Points awarded by these types of events increases each year. In other words, Asian Tour and European Tour players benefit from full field (especially co-sanctioned) tournaments that lure in world class players with appearance fees. Their world rankings are inflated drastically on a continual basis.



### *The Time Factor*

As mentioned earlier, World Ranking Points are steadily devalued over a 91 week period following the 13<sup>th</sup> week after the points were earned. This is called the "time factor" multiple which tries to place an emphasis on points earned in the last three months of competition.

This time factor works against the PGA Tour and Japan Pro Golf Tour. This is because their seasons do not last a full calendar year, unlike the Asian and European Tours. Yes, the PGA Tour season lasts from January through November. But, the best players on the PGA Tour generally play from early February through September. When the new season rolls around in January – three months later – their Official World Golf Ranking is already depressed because they played sparsely or not at all during the winter months. The points that they earned during the summer in some of the biggest events are already losing value.

On the other hand, the European Tour season has never really stopped for the last several years. It has been offering some higher profile events away from Europe during our winter months. Many of the European Tour's best enter these events, thus bumping up their World Ranking Points because of the bias of the Home Tour Rating Value points and the collection of players ranked in the middle-range of the top 200 in the Official World Golf Ranking. American players that take time off during the off season are penalized for resting. The majority of the Australasian PGA Tour's season happens when Americans are sitting at home, watching football, and not thinking about golf.

Meanwhile, many superstars sprinkle in events during this time on other tours, primarily the Asian Tour. These are often events that invite the better players on the Asian Tour to participate. This allows Asian Tour players to score points that they would not otherwise without the appearance fees that lure these superstars. Phil Mickelson's appearance in the Barclays Singapore Classic alone added 37 Rating Value points to the value of the event. Those 37 points could add up to 6 World Ranking Points as a bonus to the winner (which was Jeev Milkha Singh) and allow more players to earn any World Ranking Points were he not there.

*The Minimum Divisor*

A lot of people are wondering how it is possible that Sergio Garcia could actually catch Tiger Woods this week at the CA Championship. There are two major factors behind this. The first is that Sergio Garcia has been playing awfully well. He may not be dominant, but he has some strong wins and great finishes to his credit. He won the Players Championship and the HSBC Champions. He also finished as a runner up in the PGA Championship. These high finishes in high World Ranking Point events propel his ranking.

The other is Tiger's injury, which has limited him to one event in the last eight months before this week. During that time, the value of the points he earned for kicking everyone's butt around the world have gone down significantly. He also gets a double whammy for his schedule. Woods plays a limited and erratic schedule. He generally plays between February and September, with about twenty starts per year. That means that he is not really earning points for almost half of the year. Also, if he plays less than twenty events per year, he is penalized in calculation for his World Ranking Points.

The Official World Golf Ranking uses a "minimum divisor" of 40 for every player that earns points. In other words, the calculation assumes that a player will enter 40 tournaments during a rolling two year period. Even if they do not, they are still ranked as though they have. This obviously hurts Woods, particularly coming off of his injury. He has played just 22 times during the 104 week period entering this week. During that time, he has earned 366.24 points. If you divide that by the "minimum divisor" of 40, you get his average this week of 9.16 points per event. Were you to divide by the actual number of events he played, Woods would have an average of 16.65 points. He is undervalued by 45% because of his injury and his scheduling over that two year period.

	Without Minimum Divisor	With Minimum Divisor
Total Points Earned by Woods	366.24	366.24
Number of Events	22	40
Average Points	16.65	9.16

Meanwhile, Rory McIlroy has entered 44 events over the period and has one win. His average point number is 3.98. Not only is he not penalized for his schedule, since he played more than 40 events. Also, he is given more credence for better play of late. Though this how the system should work, Woods has 11 official wins during that time period. How is Rory so close?

## IMPACT OF THE BIAS

Basically, the way that the European, Asian, and Australasian PGA Tours structure their season all work against the PGA Tour and American players. It particularly works against players during the first part of the PGA Tour season – January through May. Since the players on these other tours are earning points while the PGA Tour is largely dormant, this allows foreign players to climb up the Official World Golf Ranking in the meantime.

All of a sudden, players that Americans may not know have found their way into the top 64 in the Official World Golf Ranking. This gets them into the Accenture Match Play Championship. It also gets them into the CA Championship. The bias is still prominent for the Masters because the top 50 ranked players earn an invitation to Augusta National. This works against American players that are still getting the rust off from the off season. By the time they get into the swing of things, many have fallen behind in World Ranking Points.

In many ways, this explains the explosion in the number of foreign born players into World Golf Championship events and the majors in recent years. Foreign born players that play twelve months of the year are at an advantage of American players that choose a more formal nine month schedule. Since the advantage has been compounded over time thanks to Home Tour Rating Value Points, the number of Americans impacted by this phenomenon increases each year. When writers wonder why there are so few Americans in the field at big time events, much of it has to do with the bias of the Official World Golf Ranking.

Don't get me wrong. Global golf is improving. The game reaches across more territory with deeper talent than ever. Still, there is a lot of validity to the questions being raised here by American players and fans when guys like Alvaro Quiros get into the Accenture Match Play. There are many observers of the PGA Tour, including Anthony Kim, who would take players at lower spots on the PGA Tour money list against higher ranked players on other Tours.

“No disrespect to those tours, but the 70th and 80th guys on our Tour are really good. If they would go overseas more, they would have more success than some of the guys ranked ahead of them,” he told the Associated Press this week.

Perhaps the players on those other tours are catching up to the guys on the PGA Tour. But, it should not be happening as quickly as it has been. For this to stop, though, the players of the PGA Tour have to play more often around the world and year round. This is why players like Kim are entering tournaments that American have never heard of in order to keep up with the Euros and Asian Tour's best.

Money talks and the Race to Dubai is certainly helping to lure better fields into European Tour events. And appearance fees don't hurt either.

The PGA Tour needs to be aware of this bias in the rankings and respond accordingly. It can either reconfigure how the rankings are compiled to reflect reality, or allow for appearance fees at PGA Tour events to increase the quality of fields. It could also institute the one-in-four rule of the LPGA Tour to ensure a decent field at every PGA Tour event. If it is not proactive in either changing the system or how they game it, then there will be an ever diminishing number of Americans from the upper ranks of the Official World Golf Ranking.

Ultimately, the World Golf Championships – played exclusively in the United States – could become a showcase of international talent that got here by playing against largely weaker competition. They will then reap the spoils with a free trip to the United States and a no cut payday.