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## Where It's Open Season

### San Diego gears up for the U.S. Open

BY SCOTT KRAMER



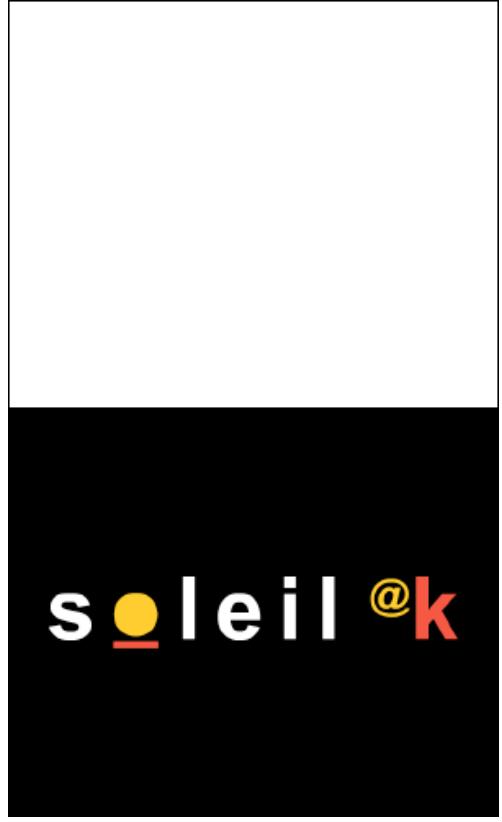
Tiger Woods on the North Course during the second round of the 2008 Buick Invitational at Torrey Pines Golf Course.

HOSTING an international sports event can reveal the best and worst aspects of a city. In San Diego's case, city officials are gushing over the 2008 U.S. Open Championship golf tournament that unfolds on Torrey Pines' South Golf Course June 12-15. After all, it brings some 200,000 people to the city's municipal golf course, the likelihood of fully occupied hotels around town, an international spotlight, unparalleled publicity and plenty of revenue. Golfers also relish the promising upside: a refurbished municipal golf course that will rank second to none nationally, a chance to see the world's best players tackle their favorite venue, and plenty of golf-related activities around town.

Yet golf-indifferent citizens may cringe over how this Major event means major traffic headaches, major crowds around town and major lines at local restaurants. The San Diego County Fair is opening one day later than usual, just to alleviate some of the anticipated road congestion the Open will cause. So who will benefit the most? Perhaps everyone.

Consider that last year's Open—held at Oakmont Country Club near Pittsburgh—brought a quarter of a million people into the city over a week. "It was fabulous for all of the restaurants and hotels," says Bob Ford, PGA head professional at Oakmont. "Commerce was thriving the whole time—all the golf courses in the area were packed big-time the entire week."

Even nongolfers came to the Steel City just to catch a glimpse of Tiger Woods' first competitive golf visit to western Pennsylvania. "He was in contention until the last putt, which made the whole week," says Ford, who thinks Woods will be equally valuable to San Diego, particularly because he was the runaway winner yet again at this year's Buick Invitational PGA Tour event held at Torrey Pines in January. "It'll be the biggest golf event played in Southern California in a decade, because the attention the Open brings is in addition to the attention Tiger brings playing in a Major. It's one thing to play in the Buick Invitational, but it's quite another to play the U.S. Open. It's a big deal."



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In fact, the Open attracts every big name in golf, plus many of America's top amateurs. And because it's such a huge event—most insiders consider it the most esteemed of golf's four Majors—it also brings around plenty of celebrities. That will be particularly true this year, because of San Diego's proximity to Hollywood. The most-publicized event is a June 14 star-studded gala being hosted by Jay Leno aboard the *U.S.S. Midway*—and benefiting the San Diego County Junior Golf Association. On June 7 at Torrey Pines, another huge fund-raiser will benefit the San Diego Sports Foundation and Pro Kids Golf Academy. Some of golf's largest equipment companies, including Carlsbad-based Callaway and TaylorMade, are also hosting celebrity-infused events throughout tournament week.



An aerial view of Torrey Pines

City officials are salivating over how much revenue the Open potentially lures—but they have little past basis to work with. "Previous destinations have not done a great job of tracking" the financial impact, says Dave Peckinpaugh, president and CEO of the San Diego Convention & Visitors Bureau. "For instance, Oakmont is a private club that is really outside of Pittsburgh, so the club handled everything last year. Thus, our Pittsburgh counterparts had a tough time getting data. We know the general attendance figures. The folks back there had nothing except rough estimates. They didn't track [hotel] room blocks."

The last municipal facility to host the Open was Bethpage State Park in Farmingdale, New York, roughly 35 miles outside of New York City, in 2002. Apparently, officials there never chased down Open impact statistics, either, citing the fact that the golf facility was too far from Manhattan to associate the event's impact with hotel occupancy and restaurant business in the city.

"Ours is a unique Open, because it's at a public municipal golf course within the city limits," says Peckinpaugh. "We're very confident it will have an enormous impact on our city, probably greater than the Super Bowl because of the length of the event. It's a week-long initiative, with practice rounds starting early in the week."

"The mayor's office and the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation, ourselves and the Convention Center Corporation have all been working jointly both on the marketing and trying to maximize returns we get for the city for this event. They have also been working on an economic impact study of the U.S. Open, so we will have specific San Diego-based numbers coming out of the Open. Hopefully, we'll do it better than our predecessors." City officials will entertain potentially large-group clients during Open week, as well.



The 18th hole of Torrey Pines South during the third round of the 2008 Buick Invitational

THE OPEN'S PUBLICITY IMPACT is huge. Broadcast on ESPN and NBC-TV, it commands a worldwide television audience for four consecutive days, for extended periods of time. "Look at the value of that airtime in promotional dollars—there's no way we could ever afford that for half a day, let alone for four days of coverage," says Peckinpaugh. "But you add up the number of media exposures and the value of that media, it's enormous. It continues to help build and enhance the brand of San Diego." City officials are also banking on the hundreds of media who will attend from all over the world, reporting on San Diego's virtues and the event back to their hometowns.

As for the Torrey Pines South Course, locals can expect to see it play tougher than ever—particularly after PGA Tour star Fred Couples suggested the course wasn't nearly in Open-caliber condition during this year's Buick Invitational. Those familiar with Torrey will notice many more false fronts by the greens, which can be incredibly punishing; new tee boxes that are much farther back, particularly on No. 13 (where it will force a 260-yard carry on drives); exceptionally high and thick rough (typical of the Open but never before seen at Torrey); 25,000 free, first-come-first-served spectator seats throughout the course; and a renovated parking lot with 50 additional spots.

The driving range will be a vast sea of catering-operation tents. Holes 9 and 10 on the North Course will be converted to a driving range, while other holes will serve as the week's home to hospitality tents, corporate villages, media center, merchandising venues and more parking. Adjacent to the main entrance will be a U.S. Open village with structures set up so spectators can learn more about the United States Golf Association as

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well as the history of the U.S. Open.

"We're expecting 42,500 spectators each day, along with 6,000 volunteers," says Joe De Bock, Torrey's veteran director of golf and head pro, who took his staff to Oakmont last year to get a feel for everything they will encounter this year. "I expect a loose, party atmosphere. We've been getting so many people here out of curiosity for some time now. They want to play the South Course, buy logoed merchandise, take pictures, walk around the course. There's a buzz, and it's a little overwhelming. It'll definitely take time for the North Course to get back in shape afterward."

Mike Antolini, 2008 U.S. Open Championship manager, says it's safe to assume more than half of the people on-site will have traveled from outside of the county to attend the Open. "Given San Diego's popularity as a tourist attraction, it will become even more of a 'destination Open' than in previous years," he says. "Those coming will leave wanting to come back for a vacation in the following years, which is why we believe the economic impact the championship has on San Diego will be even greater than usual."

Hotel-room prices have commonly escalated by at least \$100 per night beyond their normal rates. That's not as bad as at the recent Super Bowl in Phoenix, where motels typically charging \$120 per night in February were commanding \$700—and still sold out their rooms. Some opportunistic residents are taking advantage of sold-out hotels by renting their homes to visitors—some for exorbitant fees. A quick look at Craigslist.com reveals visitors can rent condos in La Jolla for about \$1,000 per bedroom for the week, all the way up to \$30,000 for a five-bedroom "estate." A two-bedroom Coronado house can net \$5,400, while a two-bedroom Oceanside condo will go to the first \$2,000 bidder.

If he weren't vying for Open tickets himself, Lomas Santa Fe real estate broker Al Salsberg says he and his wife would consider taking a week-long vacation while renting their house and car to Open fans. "It would be pretty profitable," says Salsberg. "I might be dreaming in color, though I'm sure it's being done. Every city that hosts an Open or large event like that goes through price extortion. At Augusta [Georgia's home of the coveted Masters tournament], some residents live off what they get on Masters week rent. It's enough to sustain them for the whole year."

Don't expect that type of income here. But it is the mentality in an Open market.

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