Defending Champion Conserves Energy

There is no more tired cliché in golf than the one advising ‘Beware the injured golfer”.  Yet the player being discussed in such terms ahead of this week’s WGC-HSBC Champions at Sheshan is none other than the defending champion, Xander Schauffele. He is not exactly suffering from an injury but he is feeling bad and his voice has given up on him. “I am very sick,” he explained, before apologising that the answers he would give at his pre-tournament press conference might be on the short side.

Almost certainly, Gary Player would have been the first to talk of the need to be wary of sick golfers. After all, this nine-times major winner was the first to describe golf as, “a puzzle without an answer” and to come up with a host of equally pertinent sayings.

Padraig Harrington, next year’s European Ryder Cup captain, is one among many famous golfers to have withstood injury and illness en route to the winner’s rostrum. In Harrington’s case, he hit a single-handed shot on the very eve of the 2008 Open at Birkdale and ended up with a sprained wrist.  As the defending champion, he felt obliged to play and, as luck would have it, the wrist never troubled him once his first round was under way. Lying second going into the Sunday, he went on to win by four from Ian Poulter.

Schauffele, who was hopefully feeling a bit better than he looked, said that his family – “my closest team” – had been doing everything they could to make him feel comfortable while he tried to shake off what was being seen as a flu-related bug. The process was no doubt helped by the fact that his mother, who speaks Chinese, would have known where to find the various remedies which had worked for her son when he had been similarly afflicted in the past.

His father Stefan, did his bit, though he is more into treating golf-related maladies. Stefan, who was shaping to be an Olympic athlete before he was injured in a car crash, switched to golf and has been his son’s only coach on his golfing journey.

Schauffele, who pulled out of the pro-am in a bid to save his strength for the event proper,  may not be in the same rude health as he was when he defeated Tony Finau in a sudden-death play off last year. However, he will tell you that the confidence he gleaned from winning one of the game’s bigger events has been as a major turning point in his career. “The victory  was a great confidence booster and enabled me to believe that I really belong out here,” he said.

He certainly believed in the week of this year’s Masters. They say that no-one remembers who finishes second and that is never more true than when the winner is a certain Tiger Woods.

However, it is worth recalling how Schauffele was one of the trio – it otherwise consisted of Dustin Johnson and Brooks Koepka – who wound up a shot behind Woods at Augusta ’19 and barely got a mention for it. Presumably the $858,666 handed out to each of the three of them served as adequate compensation.