Over the course of the next three days, one of my favorite sporting events of the year takes place: The Ryder Cup. Losers of 4 of the last 5, and underdogs for the first time in two decades, the American team features four rookies, and faces an uphill battle. Inside is a preview of this event, and the Friday morning matches ... which were just announced.

It's finally here. One of my favorite sporting events. The Ryder Cup.

Before we get to the meat and potatoes, here's some of the basics of the event for those that are casual observers, or maybe plan to tune in for the first time this weekend.

It's the best of America versus the best of Europe, as the twelve best golfers from each side compete in twenty eight matches over three days in an event that takes place every two years. Not one penny gets awarded to the winners, yet it is the ultimate test of will and ability to compete under pressure. Nearly every prominent golfer to compete in this event has attested that the pressure to win far exceeds anything else they've seen in their professional careers.

There are eight matches Friday and Saturday, consisting of two members of each team paired together playing against two members of the opposing team. Four of the matches each day are "fourball" matches, in which all four guys in each group play their own ball, and the side with the golfer with the lowest individual score wins the hole. The other four are "foursome" matches, in which the two members of each team hit alternate shots, and play the same ball. On Sunday, the contest finishes all twelve members of each team playing a single match play match against a member of the opposite team. A point is awarded to the winner of each match, and half points to both teams in any matches that are tied after eighteen holes. 14 1/2 of the 28 points are needed to win the Cup outright. In the event of a 14-14 tie (has happened just twice, in 1969 & 1989) ... the previous winners retain the Cup.

Despite holding a 24-9-2 lifetime edge over the Europeans, the Americans have struggled badly in this event as of late. They've lost four of the last five Ryder Cups, needing a near miracle Sunday surge in 1999 to avoid having dropped five straight. Despite coming in as heavy favorites every time, with many of the worlds top ranked players, the Americans have been badly embarrassed in this event, culminating in a through ass whooping at the hands of the Euros two years ago at Oakland Hills CC, just outside of Detroit. I was there live, and forced to suffer through a 18 1/2 - 9 1/2 beating, that ended with the Europeans smugly lighting cigars and dancing with the European flag on the 18th green.

This year, things are a little different. The Americans come in as clear underdogs for the first time in about twenty years. Due to a new Ryder Cup points system that put more emphasis on

play over the last year, four Ryder Cup rookies made the team over grizzled vets like Davis Love III and Fred Couples. Also, only Tiger Woods, Jim Furyk, and Phil Mickelson are in the top 14 in the World Rankings, which differs greatly from other years ... when America had sometimes seven of the top ten players in the world.

The event this year is taking place in Ireland, at the Arnold Palmer designed K Club. The course was designed for match play, and should make for a great theater for this incredible event. Thirty minutes from Dublin, and lush green ... The K Club features 14 lakes, and over 8,000 trees. The course opened in 1991 and hosts the European Open each year. It's a par 72, but 35 on the front, and 37 on the back ... which features three par fives, including #16 and #18, both holes where eagles can be made. It should make for a great host, and god knows the Irish patrons will be colorful as well.

Here's some of the story lines to follow ...

Friday's Opening Fourball Matches

Tiger Woods/Jim Furyk vs Padraig Harrington/Colin Montgomerie

The power duos for each team face off in the opening match, as the first point is vital for momentum and sets the tone. It was the Monty/Harrington duo that won the opening match in 2004 over Tiger and Phil Mickelson, paving the way for the Euro onslaught. Tiger and Furyk are the #1 and #2 ranked players in the world, and dominated together at the Presidents Cup last year.

Stewart Cink/J.J.Henry vs Paul Casey/Robert Karlsson

Cink and Henry are two of the hottest golfers on the American side, but Casey and Karlsson are also both playing very well. This was somewhat of a surprise pairing for the Euros. Casey just won the World Match Play title, and both he and Karlsson bomb it off the tee.

David Toms/Brett Wetterich vs Sergio Garcia/Jose Maria Olazabal

The inclusion of Wetterich is somewhat surprising, but he is very long off the tee, and could be useful this weekend in alternate shot ... so Lehman has to see what he has in him. If he struggles, he will be shut down until Sunday singles. He's paired with Toms, who has been so-so since a return from a back injury, falling out of the top 15 in the world for the first time in ages. They will face the vaunted Spaniard duo of Garcia and Olazabal, who have a mind boggling combined Ryder Cup record of 25-11-4.

Phil Mickelson/Chris DiMarco vs Darren Clarke/Lee Westwood

America's "B-Team" behind Tiger/Furyk is predictably saved for the anchor in the opening session. Phil & DiMarco also played great together at the Presidents Cup last year, and their styles mesh nicely. Westwood and Clarke are best friends, and the two captains picks of Euro captain Ian Woosnam. Clarke will be recieving all sorts of support from the Irish fans.

He is an Irishman, and lost his wife Heather to breast cancer five weeks ago.

Sitting

US - Chad Campbell, Zach Johnson, Scott Verplank, Vaughn Taylor
Europe - Paul McGinley, Henrik Stenson, David Howell, Luke Donald

The Weather

Forty mile per hour winds and heavy rainfall forced officials to close the course earlier this week, and more poor weather is expected through the weekend. Lift, clean, and place rules are expected to be enacted, and there is a good chance that this event could not finish until Monday due to weather delays.

Tiger's Wife

Tiger Woods was very angry in his Tuesday afternoon press conference after finding out one of the Irish tabloids linked his wife to a porn website. The pictures were fake, but the publication said some unsavory things about Tiger's wife, as well as the wives of some of the other American golfers in the piece. Tiger came out and said that the team is aware of it, and not happy.

The Irish Trio

The European team features three Irishmen, all of whom figure to get voracious support from the hometown crowd. Paul McGinley, Darren Clarke, and Padraig Harrington will be used to start and anchor the sessions in hopes of making the crowd a big factor.

Sergio

Publicly called Tiger out earlier this week, citing Tiger's career 7-11-2 record at the Ryder Cup, and his own 10-3-2 mark. Said he hoped he got a chance to play him. When asked to comment, Tiger basically bit his lip and said "I hope we get a chance to play each other".