Seeking Zero Risk from Zika, McIlroy Will Skip Olympics

By Erik Lief — June 22, 2016

In many ways, the game of golf is based on managing risk. For the world's best golfers and weekend duffers alike, when standing over a shot the player holding the club often must choose between being aggressive and "going for it," or conversely, minimizing risk by "laying up" with an softer-targeted shot to set up a more conservative approach to the hole.

As this relates to Rory McIlroy's decision Wednesday to skip the Olympics in Brazil due to concerns over possibly contracting the Zika virus, that choice is equivalent to him having scored a horrific, sextuple bogey from a series of fearful half-swings on the easiest of par-3's. (Or for you non-golfers, taking nine shots to accomplish a three-shot task, which is essentially the sport's version of a mental meltdown.)

This appears to be the case because despite the layers of protection McIlroy could avail himself to in August while playing in Rio de Janeiro -- which would reduce any potential viral exposure to nearly infinitesimal amounts -- instead the world's No. 4 golfer has decided that, on this issue, his risk tolerance is, well ... zero.

So he's deciding to miss the Olympics, where golf is included in the Games for the first time in 112 years, in order to lower his risk basically from minuscule to microscopic. In fact, a recent study, which we wrote about [1], concluded that the risk of infection while at the upcoming Olympics was roughly 1 in 31,250. And if McIlroy approached his golf career with that same fearful mentality, he'd never had won even a single teenage tournament.

"After speaking with those closest to me, I've come to realise that my health and my family's health comes before anything else," McIlroy, 27-year-old Irishman, said in a statement. "Even though the risk of infection from the Zika virus is considered low, it is a risk nonetheless and a risk I am
unwilling to take."

The four-time major winner, who now becomes the highest-profile athlete to pull out of the Games, said that "he and his fiancee may start a family in the next couple of years, and he doesn’t want to take the risk," as reported by the Boston Globe [2]. With the decision McIlroy also becomes the best of six golfers who said they'll skip Rio. That group includes, Adam Scott, Louis Oosthuizen, Charl Schwartzel, Marc Leishman and Vijay Singh.

One can only hope that in making his decision, McIlroy considered all the protective measures that could have been taken. First, he could cover up exposed skin with appropriate clothing. Then, he could apply bug spray to his entire body. And he could treat his clothes with permethrin, as recommended by the CDC [3].

As for protecting his fiancee, the next layer of defense comes from condom use -- and it would only be required for a relatively short period. On the topic of sexual transmission, the CDC states on its website [4], "For couples with a male partner who has traveled to an area with Zika ...

- If the male partner has been diagnosed with Zika or has (or had) symptoms, the couple should consider using condoms or not having sex for at least 6 months after symptoms begin.
- If the male partner does not develop symptoms, the couple should consider using condoms or not having sex for at least 8 weeks after the man returns."

Moreover, if McIlroy and his fiancee are not contemplating starting a family for a year or two, as he seemed to indicate, then these precautions would more than certainly suffice.

"There is an incredibly low chance of getting Zika in the short amount of time that he will be in Brazil," said Julianna Lemieux, Ph.D., from the American Council on Science and Health, who specializes in microbiology and infectious disease. "His decision is a bit extreme, given what we know about Zika. On top of that, he can use condoms when he gets home to protect his partner."

Meanwhile, across the pond, McIlroy’s thinking was met with a similar reaction from experts.

"The chances of being infected by Zika virus is low, especially if you protect yourself from mosquito bites by covering up and using a good insect repellent," said Jonathan Ball, professor of molecular virology at the University of Nottingham, in speaking with the BBC [5], adding that McIlroy’s decision struck him as being ‘extreme.’ "Most people infected don’t even show any symptoms and serious illness, although reported, seems to be a very rare event."

Maybe there were other reasons that influenced McIlroy’s decision to withdraw from the Olympics, and of course, we will likely never know whether that was the case. For instance the BBC reported that, "Earlier this month ... his concerns over the virus had eased." So maybe his reversal, using Zika as a convenient excuse, allowed him to skirt a dilemma regarding which nation he would represent.

"McIlroy is from Northern Ireland and was briefly at the center of a controversy over which team he would play for at the Games, Ireland or the United Kingdom," the New York Times reported [6]. "In the end, he chose Ireland, but his decision now becomes moot."

All that said, on the scientific merits the evidence supports his ability to safely participate. And for a
top professional, who has spent his career calculating and managing risk to become a champion in his field, McIlroy’s decision to run from Rio is a letdown for fans of both golf and science alike.