Sensing Too Much Zika Exposure, Golfers Continue Olympic Exodus

By Erik Lief — June 28, 2016

With Tuesday's news that Jason Day, the world's No. 1 golfer, will skip the Rio Olympics due to concerns over the Zika virus, given the overall exodus of golfers it seems like it's now an appropriate to ask this simple question:

Why are pro golfers the predominant group of athletes bailing from the Games?

While some speculation centers around the idea they aren't terribly excited about the return of the sport to the Olympics for the first time in 112 years, there's now word from the pro ranks that a major Zika concern may be based on perceived risk, or specifically, the amount of time golfers face potential exposure.

Along with Day, Ireland's Shane Lowry also announced Tuesday that he'll skip the Games due to concerns over Zika. And he did so while giving us insight to the way golfers view these Olympics.

"We do seem to be more at risk," Lowry said, according to ESPN [1]. "We're on the golf course for six hours a day, seven hours a day. Other athletes are in a stadium. This is just my opinion, but other athletes have been training four and eight years to go to Olympics. I can see why they're going. It's the pinnacle of their sport. It's not the pinnacle of golf yet. It could be in 20 years' time."

As we noted last week when world No. 4 Rory McIlroy cited Zika as his primary reason to forgo participation in August [2], several golfers had already backed out. Some cited Zika as the reason, or a reason (Louis Oosthuizen, Vijay Singh); others like Adam Scott, Charl Schwartzel, Branden Grace and Marc Leishman had varying explanations. Meanwhile, Graeme McDowell said he wouldn't make the trip because his wife was about to give birth and he didn't want to be out of the country for the big event. But all told, 10 professional golfers have decided to run from Rio -- in fact, three are among the world's top 10 -- with five stating that Zika was the reason for deciding not to go.
As for Day, the 28-year old Australian, Zika was the overwhelming factor.

"The reason for my decision is my concerns about the possible transmission of the zika virus and the potential risks that it may present to my wife's future pregnancies and to future members of our family," Day said in a statement posted on Twitter. "Medical experts have confirmed that while perhaps slight, a decision to compete in Rio absolutely comes with health risks to me and to my family. My wife Ellie and I have been blessed with two wonderful and healthy children and our plan is to have more. While it has always been a major goal to compete in the Olympics on behalf of my country, playing golf cannot take precedent over the safety of our family. I will not place them at risk."

So, we're back to perceived risk. And because golfers find themselves outdoors -- and in this case outdoors in Brazil, where Zika-carrying mosquitos are found -- it would seem that the predominant reason for golfers to forgo Olympic participation is site-specific. In fact, Lowry said he'd certainly play if the Games were not in Rio.

"One hundred percent, I'd be there," Lowry added. "I'd be the first person there. I was going for the whole lot and planning to stay on afterward. But I'm recently married, we're thinking about starting a family and it's not ideal to be going places like that."

We'll be keeping an eye on the remaining golfers slated to travel to South America. But based on what we've seen so far, expect more to excuse themselves before July 11, which is golf's commitment deadline.


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