Nathan Crace's LIPOUTS™

A New Grip on Life's Lessons

By: Nathan Crace Date: August 16, 2002

Pick your target. Set your right foot. Then your left. Double-check the target. Grip the club. Re-grip. Re-grip. Re-grip. Re-grip. Re-grip. Re-grip. Re-grip. Re-grip. If you've seen any golf on television during the past two years, you know where this is going. Sergio Garcia's relentless habit—we'll call it a nervous twitch—of re-gripping the club more times than you can bear to watch before hitting a shot. Any shot. At the 2002 U.S. Open at Bethpage Black, it became such a torment to spectators that the less-than-cordial crowd of New Yorkers was sure to give him their opinion of the situation. The groans and moans echoing through the massive crowds earlier in the week soon turned to heckling and disparaging remarks about the young Spaniard's family origins and his superstar tennis pro girlfriend Martina Hingis. Such a shame. Sure the habit is annoying. It's almost painful to watch. But I can relate in a different way.

Granted I've never played in the U.S Open—or anything remotely close in importance to the golf world. However, I have had to work my way through a nervous twitch that almost forced me to quit the game. A twitch that was eerily similar to Garcia's. Playing varsity golf in high school in Indiana, I developed what others called a "twitchy thumb." I would take my stance over the ball preparing to swing and stand there twitching my right thumb over the grip—some 15 to 20 times before swinging. It got so bad that my own teammates would ask the coach not to be paired with me—especially in important matches. Why did I do it? When did it begin? No one knew. Especially not me. It's not as though I wanted to stand there twitching. Nor was I a nervous person. But that thumb consumed my golf game and when I could not stop it, it nearly stopped me. I finally forced myself to get over it—only twitching once nowadays. So I felt bad for Sergio at the U.S Open and although I found myself thinking to the television "Just hit the ball," I also found myself wanting to make all of the raucous members of the crowd disappear for his sake. I felt sorry for him because I could relate, in part, to the frustration. He has enough on his shoulders as the one the media has picked to de-throne Tiger without having to deal with a nervous twitch—and the fallout from the fans.

Fast forward to the made-for-television Battle at Bighorn in the desert southwest. Nicklaus and Woods versus Trevino and Garcia. The cagey veterans had their share of the limelight with a handful of crowd-pleasing shots and Tiger put on a proverbial clinic of shot making and scoring. But the bigger story from where I stood was Garcia's re-gripping—or lack thereof. It had nearly disappeared or the most part, or at least had been severely minimized. "Good for him," I thought. And apparently, so did Jack Nicklaus. During a commercial timeout, a camera and a microphone captured an intriguing sound bite for those of us in our living rooms—the type of glimpse inside the game we don't much get to see. Nicklaus was telling Garcia how proud he was of him to overcome his habit. "It makes me happy to see guys be able to change things to improve their games," he told Garcia. Sergio was beaming and, with his arm around the shoulder of the greatest golfer to ever play the game, smiled back and said simply "thank you." If ever there was a reassurance that he was doing the right thing in getting rid of his nervous twitch, there it was: the undisputed master of the game giving him a lesson in life on changing things within himself for the better. Not because of pressure from hecklers in an overzealous crowd or sports critics.

That is one reason why golf is so different from other sports we see in modern times. Young stars of the PGA Tour are not being tried for murder or being led from their home in handcuffs by undercover FBI agents. Is it because of the relationship between the veterans and the young guys? Is the difference, in part, because they have someone to turn to when they need help, someone to take them under a wing for some serious one-on-one "father-son" talk in a stressful and "on-the-run" occupation? Someone to learn from because they've been there and done that? Although I cannot verify its authenticity, one of my favorite stories relating to this topic is of a young Arnold Palmer in his rookie year on the PGA Tour. He was meeting veteran player Byron Nelson for a practice round prior to a tournament. They met in the pro shop and Nelson asked the club pro behind the counter what the course record was and who held it. As they made their way to the first tee, Palmer figured Nelson wanted to know the course record because he was going to set a new one that day, but he asked Nelson why he wanted to know who held the record? Nelson replied that if the club pro had the record, he didn't want to break it. After all, it was the club pro's course, not his. This is the type of life lesson even the man who would become King can learn from the game of golf. The type of lesson Nicklaus so graciously takes the time to pass on to Garcia and countless others

Nathan Crace is the Senior Design Associate at Maxwell Golf Group in Jackson, Mississippi. His freelance "Lipouts" column is based on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. *Copyright 2002.*