

Nathan Crace's

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Titleist & Callaway: Playing Fair or Just Playing Favorites?

By: Nathan Crace Date: December 17, 2001

I admit I didn't think much about it at first until a good friend of mine who is a golf course superintendent returned an entire set of Callaway woods and irons because the Callaway sales rep had scattered a few dozen coasters with a particular ad campaign emblazoned upon them around the grill at my friend's club. Considering that this friend of mine is a fairly rational person, I heeded his advice, decided to do a little research of my own, and pulled some recent golf publications to peruse. Sure enough, there it was in full color: a two-page spread in a national publication featuring a seemingly dark and mysterious figure of a superintendent in the early morning hours with his cup cutter at his side rolling ball after ball toward the hole from different angles to ensure that putts would not go in the hole. In the ad, Odyssey claims that with the White Hot putter in hand, you will strike "a solid blow to the ego of the fellow who cuts the holes."

In reality, Callaway's very discreet slap against golf course superintendents in order to promote the Odyssey TriHot and White Hot putters has probably gone unnoticed by most superintendents—or they have elected to ignore it and go about their work. Looking back over the past few months' worth of magazines, however, these Odyssey putters have been marketed to golfers with warnings that the superintendent is out to get them. The ads ask questions like "Is the intention of the greenkeeper to make the game more challenging or to torture the golfer?" They go on in other spots to claim that the superintendent's goal is to make you miss putts and admonish golfers that "Your most dangerous opponent isn't the club champion. It's the greenkeeper."

Maybe it's just me, but I don't know of any superintendent who has time to lurk around in the pre-dawn mist like some clinical psychopath plotting against the golfers at his (or her) course. Not to mention a superintendent with the Harry Potter-like skills required for controlling the roll of a ball as it is depicted in one of the magazine ads.

Then there is the new campaign for Titleist's NXT ball. This time the target of the ad is not the superintendent who cares for the course, but rather the architect who designs the course. Granted, John Cleese's portrayal of fictitious golf course architect Ian MacCallister is humorous in its Monty Python-like exuberance; however, the fundamental premise of the campaign is to portray architects as out-of-touch eccentrics who possess some PETA-like zeal for protecting the classic courses from extinction at the hands of profiteering golf ball manufacturers. Typically, one only encounters this degree of propaganda during election campaigns—not golf ball ads.

Let's give both companies the benefit of the doubt and assume that these campaigns were devised by outside advertising agencies that are probably out-of-touch with the close connection between the game of golf, architects and superintendents. So what if Tiger and Duval switched to Nike? The "Number One Ball in Golf" still has Mickelson and he seems like a great guy! Does Nike have Titleist so scared of losing market share that they are willing to stoop to "guerrilla" marketing strategies that lynch architects in an effort to make the NXT more attractive to the younger, more rebellious golfer? Acushnet's VP of ball marketing George Sine admits they are "literally grabbing customers by the jugular." Unfortunately for architects, they simply appear to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time when the "grabbing" began.

Perhaps the most striking facet about who these two ad campaigns target is who they do not: the golf professionals. A good number of my friends are golf professionals, but their segment of the golf industry is conspicuously absent from such attacks. Yet in the very same publication where I found the aforementioned anti-greenkeeper ad there was a full-page ad featuring "Signboy's Scrapbook" which details the events in the life of the sign-toting young man who not only loves the Foot-Joy shoes and gloves worn by his heroes on the PGA Tour, but also worships the very ground upon which their leather-wrapped and comfortably dry feet walk. To me this is odd. Why would such an icon in the golf industry like Titleist/Foot-Joy Worldwide harbor such drastically different points of view regarding the status of pros and architects? To be fair, I haven't noticed any anti-superintendent ads from Titleist or Foot-Joy yet. The answer may be as plain as the Sta-Sof on Signboy's hand. Just ask yourself who buys the merchandise in your golf shop. Not the superintendent or the architect. These advertising agencies may be out-of-touch, but they're not stupid enough to bite the hand of the one who feeds their client.

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