

Sportsmanship and Alarm Clocks

By: Nathan Crace Date: August 6, 2001

Like most who watched the 130th British Open two weeks ago, my jaw had to be physically removed from the floor when I realized what had transpired on the second tee. There was Ian Woosnam, former Masters champion, being assessed a two-stroke penalty for having fifteen clubs in his bag. His nearly-hole-in-one-turned-tap-in-birdie on the starting hole had effectively become a bogey 4 and it took him more than a couple of holes to recover his poise. At first, I was perturbed that he was blaming the incident on his longtime caddie Miles Byrne as Woosnam stomped about the second tee. "I give him one bloody job and he can't do it," was what I heard—or something to that effect. I must admit I'm not the best at repeating exact quotes intact.

I wondered how he could blame this fiasco on his caddie when Woosie was nearly late to the tee because he was trying out two different drivers on the range trying to warm up to one or the other. Some could even argue that his caddie actually saved him two more penalty strokes by pointing out the oversight before he teed off on the second hole! Grab your rule book: two strokes per hole, maximum four strokes per round. In the end, however, it is the player's responsibility to be sure he or she abides by the Rules of Golf—a fact Woosie later admitted to (although somewhat reluctantly) in a press interview.

But consider this: unlike other sports, golfers have always been charged with the unenviable responsibility of enforcing the rules upon themselves and (when necessary) others in their group. Sure you have the occasional "foot wedge" in your weekend foursome, but competitive golf is another world. When was the last time you saw Shaq stop a game to tell the referee that he was holding Mutombo in the low post or that he was camping out in the lane for more than three seconds? Still thinking? Remember the Super Bowl when Brett Favre kept stopping play to tell the officiating crew about members of his own offensive line who were guilty of holding violations? Of course not. Nothing against O'Neal or Favre, but one of the things that places the game of golf in a class of its own is voluntary enforcement. You just don't see it in other big time sports—not even the other "gentlemen's game" of tennis.

Back to the Open: Why was I upset with Woosnam's behavior? I shouldn't have been. After all, he probably handled it better than I would have given similar circumstances. No one else caught Woosnam's error on the first tee before his round began and when his caddie told him about it, mad as he was, he went straight to the official in his group and called the penalty on himself. He didn't hesitate. He didn't sneak over to the side of the tee and try to stash the rogue driver in some gorse when no one was looking. He didn't try to talk his way out of it and—unlike some other sports—he didn't try to blame his breach of the rules on another competitor. That just doesn't happen in golf. Woosnam had to take full responsibility.

Then fast forward two weeks to the Scandinavian Masters and there is yet another Sunday in a large tournament and another blunder by Woosnam's caddie. This time, however, it was a total meltdown. Byrne overslept on Sunday morning and completely missed the tee time. To make matters worse, he had with him the keys to Woosnam's locker (club officials had to reportedly break into the locker to get Woosie's shoes). This time, Byrne got the axe and perhaps not coincidentally Woosnam shot his best round of the tournament—a three under par 69.

If we learn anything from all of this, perhaps it will be to think about how different the game would be without rules and alarm clocks. Rules are rules and kudos to the Welshman and his caddie for reporting the error on the second tee at The Open. But like Bobby Jones once said, "If you're going to congratulate me for assessing myself a penalty stroke, you might as well congratulate me for not robbing a bank today." Or something to that effect.

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