

The Young and the Restless

By: Nathan Crace Date: September 21, 2003

How young is too young? We have already established how is too old (Champions Tour), so why not how young is too young? It seems like only a few years ago that Hale Irwin became one of the oldest players to ever win the US Open at age 45 at Medinah (for you younger readers, see "Champions Tour: Irwin, Hale"). Even though that was 13 years ago, the older set has had no shortage of great showings on the PGA Tour this year either. Peter Jacobsen, Scott Hoch, Fred Couples, Bob Tway, and J.L. Lewis all recorded wins this year. This year, Craig Stadler won the B.C. Open with the young guys as well as the Senior Players Championship with the elder set. Remember Kenny Perry? The 43 year-old Kentuckian was for a time the hottest golfer on the face of the planet this summer!

So why are we so hung up on youth? Well, we're human for one thing. We are continuously caught up in being, looking, and feeling young and when seemingly young people do what we only expect more mature people to accomplish, we cannot help but be enthralled. Most of us are genuinely happy for them and want to see them overcome the odds. And I'm sure there are a few sick ones who watch them like a televised police chase from the helicopter's vantage point—waiting to see their tires shot out and crashing into the guard rail. You probably know one of these people. Add to this appetite the increased television coverage of junior events and non-junior events won by juniors and the fervor only grows. From the outside, juniors today appear to be better players as a group than in decades past. But things for junior golfers today are much—MUCH—different than they were for juniors as little as ten years ago. And don't expect the trend to reverse anytime soon.

Exhibit A: In 2002, the USGA abolished the rule preventing juniors from accepting free equipment. This was done to level the playing field between the juniors from wealthy families and the talented juniors whose families could not justify spending \$1,000 on a new set of irons to keep the competitive edge with the other kids. Exhibit B: The "Information Age." In addition to the twenty-four hour Golf Channel and digital satellites that can pick up tournaments from around the globe, junior golfers of today have access to the Internet and the four corners of the Earth to search for information on fine-tuning their swing and evaluating the best and latest equipment from which they now can choose (see Exhibit A above). More than ever, they have unbridled access to information that I only dreamed of when I was playing high school golf. In fact, a great number of you are reading this column via the Internet instead of in print.

My concern for these junior "phenoms" is that they are missing out on being kids. They (or perhaps more precisely their parents) are so concerned about their being the best, there's no time for normal life. Don't agree? Just ask Michelle Wie. Exhibit C: The 13 year-old Hawaiian long bomber spent pretty much the entire summer in the lower 48 playing in every tournament she could, including the Nationwide Tour's stop in Boise, Idaho. I'm sure it was a great experience for her golf game and her maturity—but she's only 13. She's not supposed to be mature. She's not supposed to be shipped across the country trying to win the US Women's Open, the Junior Amateur, the Women's Amateur, the Women's Pub Links (which by the way, she did win) and a Nationwide event with her father picking fights with the LPGA's tenured players along the way. Still think I'm overreacting? Exhibit D: See "Capriati, Jennifer: Post Puberty Meltdown".

So who bears the responsibility for letting kids be kids? You would assume the parents. However, when you hear some of these people speak about their kids, you get that creepy "living-my-life-vicariously-through-my-children-but-I'm-in-denial-about-it" feeling—like the mothers who cart their 4 year-old daughters all over the country in search of the beauty pageant crowns that they themselves could not garner in their youth. Exhibit E: There is a story of one junior golfer whose parents make him run one mile for every stroke over 75. Seriously.

How about the members of the sports media? Yeah right. They're drawn to this feeding frenzy like sharks to chum. They need it to subsist. If they don't exploit it, their competition will and they'll lose advertising dollars and market share in the process. Perhaps the blame is on the agents and equipment manufacturers? Go waving a few million dollars in front of some 17 year-old to do what he or she has already been doing in the amateur ranks and there's no wonder some take the bait. Who can blame them? Not LeBron James.

So how about the kids themselves then? It's difficult to place all of the blame on the kids. And it borders on hypocrisy to say on the one hand that they should be allowed to be kids and not commodities, then on the other hand say they are victims of their own young fate. It would be difficult at best to be so talented and determined, beat people twice your age like a proverbial drum, and then tell the family who looks at you like the second coming and say "I've had enough. I'm taking some time off." So then the most rational answer is that we all must bear some portion of the blame—whether we want to admit it or not. And we probably won't...

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2003.