

Gamesmanship In Golf

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The game of golf traditionally has been known as a gentleman's game. There is an unwritten code among golfers which underlines integrity in the way the game is played. Etiquette and courtesy are the first subjects discussed in the rules of golf and are a hallmark of how golf is officiated. It remains one of the few sports in which the player calls penalties on himself.

You must remember, however, that all that glitters is not gold. Golf is played by men who tend to be competitive in all sporting endeavors. That competitiveness often includes taking the measure of ones opponent. Some golfers simply cannot resist an opportunity to slip the needle to a friendly competitor. Others choose artful means of testing ones concentration. Still others cross the line of sportsmanship with creative distractions. All these are forms of gamesmanship.

There is an area of gamesmanship which is altogether innocent fun between friends. This includes the good-natured poking of fun at one another. When a friend tops a shot and sends the ball skittering up the fairway in what is called a "wormburner," you may remark, "Nice putt," or "You really stayed down on that shot." On the putting green, when a player leaves an approach putt very short he may well expect to hear someone say, "I don't think you lost your turn." We are all familiar with the repertoire of one-liners that poke fun at an opponent, but serve equally to break the tension of a bad shot. Such remarks are well-intended attempts to lend humor and punctuate a potentially embarrassing moment with a comma instead of a period.

The Needle

The same set of friendly remarks may be used with a different tone of voice or with a different purpose in mind. Their content and timing serve to sting or prod an opponent into focusing on his mistakes. The scorching "wormburner" may be greeted by, "I hope you can remember how you hit that shot." The putt that lacks the proper length may render, "Short again, Jake?"

Such needling remarks may take on a more challenging nature when directed at a golfer's particular weakness. "Do you always putt out of traps?" or, "Don't you have a sand wedge?" Such remarks almost demand an answer which you do not really want to supply. After a poor chip shot, I have heard opponents say, "What club did you abuse?" After a "fat" shot, one might expect to hear, "Once a farmer, always a farmer. He is forever cultivating the soil."

You have heard of post hypnotic suggestions. Well, pre-shot needle can have the same effect. "You guys should have been with us last week. Ole Jack here took an eight on this hole... two balls in the water." That one is designed to bring back negative memories and not lighten your load. Some other suggestive

pre-shot remarks include "friendly" warnings such as "Don't forget about the out of bounds area to the right." Such remarks are designed to draw your ball like a magnet to the penalty area.

Watch Out For "Helpful" Advice

Some players enjoy offering free information which is intended to confuse or mislead an opponent. Comments regarding the speed and direction of the wind should be examined and confirmed before you make up your mind on how the wind will effect your own shot. Accurate club selection is critical to the play of par three holes and approach shots. If the giver of free advice can plant even the smallest doubt in your mind, he has accomplished his purpose.

Some of the most subtle misinformation centers around club selection. The gamesman may volunteer what club he used or lament the club he should have used. In either case he is attempting to confuse or mislead your own decision-making process.

Gamesmanship may also take the form of observing the club that others select for a shot. Sam Snead once noticed a new player on tour who had his caddie watch Sam's bag to see what club Sam would use to approach the greens. Snead waited until he got to a par three with water behind the green. A strong wind complicated the club selection and he was sure the young fellow would want to know what club to use. Sam pulled out a four iron instead of the six he really needed. He choked the club and hit it on the toe of the clubface to the center of the green. He had to fight back a smile when the young golfer air mailed the green with a four iron and landed in the water.

Other "helpful" gamesmanship centers around the putting green. After putting an innocent remark to the effect that the green is faster or slower than the other greens should be taken with a grain of salt. Also be wary of opponents who want to be helpful in reading your putt for you. There is a fellow at our course who tells everyone that our greens break less than they appear to when you are putting up and down the green, but they break more than they appear to when putting across the greens. I have seen players who have been putting our greens as long as he has, take his advice and mess up their putting for weeks.

Distractions

Serious gamesmanship focuses on interrupting ones natural rhythm and timing. They are intended to crack that mental shell of concentration you need to deliver your best swing. The gamesman normally saves these little distractions for shots which are crucial to your bets or for shots which have the potential for adding several strokes to your score.

These distractions may be visual, audible or both. Ever have someone slam their club in their golf bag just in the middle of your backswing? Blowing the nose and cranking the ball washer are other favorite distractions. On the surface they

may appear to be unintended interruptions to your concentration. If they occur more than once over several holes you may want to examine the intent and address your concern to the offending party.

Some golfers concentrate so well over the ball that they never hear this kind of distracting sounds. I know that I can really get mentally centered on a putt. I have had fellow competitors apologize for making an indiscreet sound while I was putting and I truthfully never heard it. Other players are blessed or cursed, as the case may be, with extra sensory sound detectors and are easily distracted by sounds most persons ignore.

I know a guy who waits for airplanes to fly over, golf carts to stop in the next fairway, and insists that you keep your hands out of your pockets (lest you rattle your change) while he is putting. He also claims that you can hear a woman's voice twice as far as a man's on the course. When he is putting he wants everyone else to stand at a modified parade rest, even on cold windy days. I refuse to be intimidated by him. I simply stand behind him where he can't see me, fold my arms and hold my breath until he has putted.

Visual distractions are more difficult to shut out than sound. Some of the more serious and intentional gamesmanship tricks involve visual distractions. I must admit that my concentration can be broken by a visual distraction which occurs during my swing. When that happens, I wonder if it is intentional and if so, is it worth a verbal confrontation. I normally opt to disregard the first occurrence and wait to see if it happens again. The second such occurrence usually earns the offender a long knowing stare in order to avoid a verbal exchange. Hostile, verbal exchanges tend to distract other innocent parties in the group unnecessarily.

Persons who use visual distraction violate the rule of courtesy which states that, "No one should move, talk or stand close to or directly behind the ball or the hole when a player is addressing the ball or making a stroke."

One seemingly innocent ploy is to stand close to a player about to swing and lean on a club. As the player begins his swing, the gamesman crosses his leg or moves the club. Others may simply drop the club, a ball, a cap, a towel or any other object they might have in their hand.

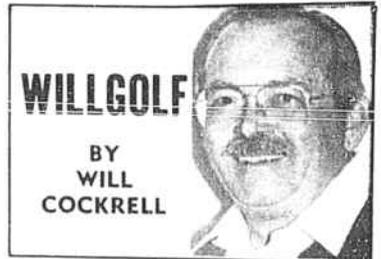
Launching A NASA Engineer

The preferred method of dealing with such distractions is to ask the offending party to move further away so as not to interfere with your swing. Once at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia my partner and I had a pick-up game with two NASA engineers. We made a friendly wager and set out to play. I noticed that the two NASA guys had a habit of standing directly behind us on the teeing ground. Once when we got a couple of holes up on the pair one of them let his club slip from his hand as my

partner was swinging. When my partner topped his shot the offender apologized with a smile. The next time it happened my partner did not ask them to move and this time the other guy let the ball in his hand drop with a similar effect on my partner's shot.

When it came my time to drive I asked them to please clear the tee box. They obliged and did not repeat the offense until the 9th hole when a press bet was in effect. When my partner prepared to hit his tee shot they had again moved behind him. He said nothing and they did nothing. When my turn to hit came I took several practice swings and noticed out of the corner of my eye that the ball dropper had a ball in his hand.

I decided to address the ball and pretend to make a stroke with the intention of making another practice swing if nothing happened. However I would "accidentally" lose my grip on the driver during the backswing if the ball dropped from the engineers



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hand. Sure enough the ball dropped and the driver flew straight and true toward the two gamesmen. It sent them sprawling and yelping to the ground. I retrieved my driver, wiped the handle with my towel and apologized with a smile.

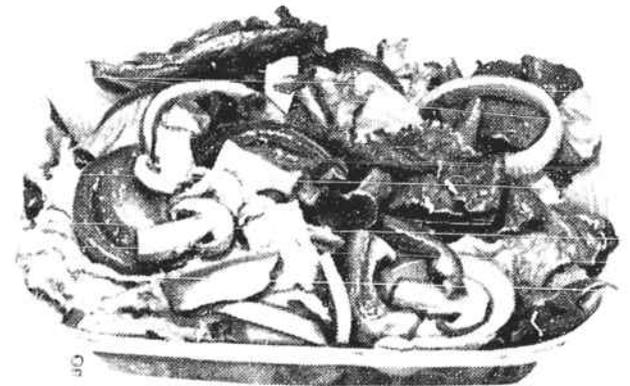
Needless to say, they never again stood behind us "Grunts" again. Their cute conversational needles seemed less frequent as well. After the round when my partner and I were counting our two bucks bounty, I could not resist comparing the color of NASA money to the grass stain on the balldropper's trousers.

The best defense against gamesmanship is to be aware of the ways your concentration can be interrupted. To be forewarned is to be prepared to deal with an offending player.

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