

Life Is Not a Video Game; Taking the Human Element Out of Sports is Tragic

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While it should not be surprising that a generation brought up on video games wants to turn real sports into video games, the rush to eliminate the human element from uniquely compelling human activities is a treacherous road to travel.

There are many great lessons that competing in sports teaches and one of those is that life, unlike a video game, does not have a reset button. Our actions have consequences and we have to live with them, even when we get a bad break.

Sports are about human achievement, but they are also a measure of human accountability. The games we play provide an immediate window into the character of a person. And golf is a sport in which competitors do not take pride in getting away with rules violations.

Recently, Jordan Spieth was disqualified from the Genesis Invitational on the PGA Tour for signing a scorecard reflecting a lower score on a hole than he actually made. According to the rule, if you sign for a higher score, you live with the higher score; if you sign for a lower score, you are disqualified.

First off, it is worth noting that Spieth – class act that he is – had no problem with the penalty.

On the abomination formerly known as Twitter he posted this:

“Today, I signed for an incorrect scorecard and stepped out of the scoring area, after thinking I went through all procedure to make sure it was correct. Rules are rules, and I take full responsibility. I love this tournament and golf course as much as any on PGATOUR so it hurts to not have a run at the weekend. Really appreciated the support in LA at thegenesisinv.”

That did not stop a barrage of responses critical of the disqualification. Many did not understand the rule. And a lot felt that in this age of technology players should no longer be held responsible for keeping track of their score. Someone on the abomination formerly known as Twitter going by the handle “Popegolf” combined both, posting:

“So it’s ok to sign for a higher score but not lower? This is dumbest rule. Should have an official scorer with each group. They record your score. You can sign and accept or not sign and dispute the issue. It’s 2024 not 1960. Or make the person who scored for him accountable too.”

In fact, there is an official scorer with each group who records the number you see on-line and on TV. But there are also scorecards kept by the competitors. In a threesome, Player A keeps the scorecard of Player B, who keeps the card of Player C, who keeps the card of player A.

At the end of the round, players go to the scoring tent and verify that the scorecard accurately reflects their round and then signs the card. Once the player leaves the scoring area the card is considered official. It is once they leave the scoring area that a problem exists if there is an error on the card.

Opposition to this rule has grown as technology has taken over sports. From where I sit, removing the human element from the games we play undermines the purpose of competition, which measures not only ability but character. And part of the test of character is how you react when you get a bad break, even if that bad misfortune is not entirely your fault.

Using replay to reverse real-time rulings made by people negates a lesson taught by sports: Life, on occasion, is not fair. If it takes five minutes of combing through multiple slow-motion angles of a play to determine what happened is the outcome not close enough that the original decision by a person was valid? That seems especially true at a time when every team sport says the time it takes to play a game is a problem.

Electronics and analytics, seen as progress by many, are making sports slower and duller. Baseball, for example, has become a home run and strikeout game because analytics says striking out 200 times in a season and batting .215 is not a bad thing if you hit 40 home runs.

Maybe, but it sure is boring to watch. For my money, watching Roberto Clemente hit a triple, running out from under his hat, or Willie Mays scoring from first base on a single is way more fun to watch than Pete Alonso hitting 46 home runs while striking out 156 times and hitting .217.

Willie Mays hit 660 home runs and I never knew the exit velocity of any of them yet I enjoyed each one I saw. The first time I stood next to Jack Nicklaus and watched him hit a tee shot was in 1967 and I couldn't believe the force with which he swung a golf club. I

didn't know his ball speed or launch angle, but I sure enjoyed watching him crush a golf ball.

Recently, there were many who said the proposed rollback of the golf ball by the USGA and R&A is going to destroy the growth of the game by making it harder to play. All I can say to that is I was swept into golf during one of its greatest growth spurts, fueled by the emergence of Arnold Palmer in the late '50s and early '60s.

I learned the game with persimmon woods, blade irons and a wound golf ball. There were toe hooks, heel slices, balls that you could fade or hook with a 9-iron and cut the cover with an errant swing. And I loved every minute of it. The challenge of the game was the attraction of the game.

That's all by way of saying that progress is often short-sighted, failing to look down the road and fully anticipating the impact of change. Did the early pioneers of social media foresee identity theft, cyber-bullying, the use of artificial intelligence to create fake news, the use of AI to manipulate consumers?

Yes, technology makes it possible to remove human accountability for scoring from the golf, but because it's possible doesn't mean that it is good. In a world that speeds up simply because it can, golf is a welcome refuge that still cherishes its traditions.

Yes, Jordan Spieth was disqualified from the Genesis Invitational for a scoring error. There are multiple lessons for young people here: Check your work; don't assume someone else got it right – verify; and when you make a mistake, own it. Don't blame someone else or the system. Own it.

There are many great traditions in golf – in sports – that are worth preserving and there are those – like segregation – that needed to be abandoned. The challenge is to move forward without leaving the good behind. In golf, a rule that teaches the value of personal accountability is worth keeping. Just ask Jordan Spieth.