

Is Golf Our Savior or a New Battleground?

By Ron Sirak

There was a time when I thought golf could teach essential lessons that would help us understand how far we have strayed from being a civil society. And then the Ryder Cup happened at Bethpage and it occurred to me that instead of golf helping reign in bullying behavior that behavior was nudging its way into a sport that treasures civility, a game that I love.

At the heart of the culture that surrounds golf is respect for your opponent and a rock-solid allegiance to the Rules. The ethics of the game are, in fact, written into the Rules of Golf and breaches of those standards are viewed harshly.

Rule 1.2 states:

All players are expected to play in the spirit of the game by:

- *Acting with integrity – for example, by following the Rules, applying all penalties, and being honest in all aspects of play.*
- *Showing consideration to others – for example, by playing at a prompt pace, looking out for the safety of others, and not distracting the play of another player.*
- *Taking good care of the course – for example, by replacing divots, smoothing bunkers, repairing ball-marks, and not causing unnecessary damage to the course.*

In team sports, players try to be deceptive by stealing a strike in baseball, denying you touched an out-of-bounds ball in basketball, flopping in soccer, holding the person you are guarding in football. In most other sports, it is considered clever when you get away with something. Not so in golf.

Rule 1.3 states:

You are expected to recognize when you have breached a Rule and to be honest in applying your own penalties.

Bob Jones, the greatest amateur golfer the United States has produced, was once complimented for calling a penalty on himself. He responded by saying: “That’s like complimenting someone for not robbing a bank.” For Jones, following the rules is what everyone is expected to do.

At Bethpage, the Ethics of the Game went out the window.

Obscenities were hurled at players from Team Europe, especially Rory McIlroy. As if that wasn’t bad enough, the ethical standard to quiet down when a player begins their pre-shot routine was violated over and over. Some spectators had rubber ducks they’d squeak when McIlroy was hitting. There is nothing about this behavior that is acceptable. Yet tens of thousands of fans condoned it by finding it funny.

I want to believe that the worst of the spectators at Bethpage were not really golfers but rather an alcohol infused gaggle of young men whose misplaced notion of what constitutes a good time is to scream obscenities and insults at players who happened to not be American. I hope it is true that the bulk of the brutes were not golfers.

As circumstantial evidence that this might be the case, virtually none of my tens of thousands social media followers pushed back against my column immediately after the Ryder Cup in which I wrote that while American players lost the Ryder Cup, American fans lost something much harder to win back – respect.

The few who did defend the behavior of the American fans were bots on Twitter who had anonymous handles and virtually no followers. Unfortunately, those who abused and bullied at Bethpage did not hide behind anonymity but rather reveled in their boorish behavior. What they did hide behind was the anonymity of being in a crowd. It was difficult for law enforcement officers to single out the perpetrators.

This lack of respect for others has been a slow slide. Now, it has become OK to say you hate those with whom you disagree and that you want harm to come to them. It is Ok to say those who have opinions that differ with yours are stupid or part of an evil cabal. I'm old enough to remember when that was not the case.

When Sen. Ted Kennedy died in 2009 among those who spoke at the Catholic funeral for the liberal icon of the Democratic party was Sen. Orrin G. Hatch of Utah, a conservative Republican and lifelong member of The Church of Latter Day Saints. There could not be two people more different than Kennedy and Hatch, yet they were friends and had enormous respect for each other. Among Hatch's other close friends was Muhammad Ali. That was a time – only 16 years ago – when political foes could be friends and share mutual respect.

At the risk of sounding like a grouchy old man, I'll tell you what it was like when cell phones first came into existence. Back then, no one would think of sitting next to you at an airport waiting gate, for instance, and have a phone conversation. They'd walk off and find a secluded spot where they would not bother anyone.

Now, not only do most people have no regard for babbling away while someone sits next to them, they also put the phone on speaker so you can have the pleasure of hearing both ends of the conversation.

It seems that respect for personal space is a battle lost.

In my opinion, this is all part of the foundation on which the uncivil behavior at Bethpage was built. The Europeans were not just our opponents, they were our enemies. The personal space that McIlroy entered when he began his pre-shot routine, was not respected. He was considered a fair target for abuse.

The fact that almost all in the golf community were appalled at what happened at Bethpage gives me reason for hope. Maybe golf will remain a game of Rules, Ethics and Respect. Maybe it will remind us that the way we treat each other every day should follow the path of how the Rules of Golf demand we treat each other on the golf course.

Almost certainly, Bethpage was a turning point. Let's hope the game turns in the right direction – toward its history of respect and honorable behavior and not away from it. And let's hope that becomes a guidepost for an increasingly angry, disrespectful culture to follow.

I'm old enough to remember civility and young enough at heart to believe it can be regained. Golf is a painting you never finish. The pleasure is in the process. Let the brutes at Bethpage be a mere blemish on the canvass and a reminder that we can all do better.

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