

Nathan Crace's

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A Gentlemen's Game

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Since the inception of the game of golf (whether you believe it began in its much-accepted birthplace on the sandy links land of the British Isles or elsewhere), it has been considered a gentlemen's game. For some time, limitations such as access to clubs, balls, and courses gave the game a feel of elitism because only those with the money and the means could afford to play the game. And in its early years, society was such that the only people with these means were men. Even in today's socio-demographics, we are seeing more and more women, juniors, blue collar men, and other members of the "non-elite" picking up the game on public courses and driving ranges across the country (and the globe). I say the more the merrier and I welcome as many people to the game as can find the time to play. But we must remember that one of the most important foundations of the game of golf is the protocol expected of its participants. Gender wise, it may no longer be a "gentlemen's" game, per se, but gentlemanly conduct should still be part and parcel of the game—regardless of the player's gender. And the positive effects of such conduct is proving to pay dividends to some very talented young players on the PGA Tour early in the 2006 season.

Aaron Oberholser (winner of the 2006 AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am) found a new focus in his game and transformed that into his first career win not too far from where he grew up in San Mateo, California. Maybe he knew that the gallery would be full of family and friends and wanted to keep a cool head in front of them. Or conversely, maybe he forced himself to focus more on the task at hand to avoid the distraction of having friends and family pouring through the galleries at Pebble Beach. Whatever the reason, the end result was a five shot win, some nice crystal for the mantle, and a cool \$972,000 deposit in his checking account. Not to mention the respect of his peers.

Oberholser has been a self-admitted work in progress with continued improvement this year leading up to the AT&T with a tie for 24th at the Sony Open, a finish for 15th at the Buick Invitational, and a tie for 10th the previous week at the FBR Open. Watching him on the range, he has all the tools in the bag. It was taking that swing and game from the range to the course via a strong mental game that was the problem. Sound familiar to you too? He was determined not let a bad shot get him down and he kept his game plan to enjoy himself and see if his talent could shine through. It did. Even through a scary stretch of holes on Sunday afternoon that included back-to-back bogies on 13 and 14 when it looked like he may have been on the verge of being the next young player to crack under the pressure, he kept his focus and cruised home to a five-shot win.

The following week, another cool head prevailed when Rory Sabbatini turned a new outlook on life (and his golf game) into a victory at the Nissan Open in Los Angeles. Sabbatini's Sunday round looked eerily similar to the proverbial wheels falling off in the final lap as he made his way through the back nine at Riviera. He and crowd favorite Fred Couples kept running, stumbling, and keeping Craig Barlow and Adam Scot (who was already in the clubhouse) in the game until a clutch birdie on the 16th hole that gave Rory the breathing room he needed. One thing missing from the win in L.A. was Sabbatini walking off from a green while his playing partners sized up a putt and waiting on the next tee (i.e. the now infamous Ben Crane incident at Congressional in 2005).

To Sabbatini's credit (and in his defense), we will always have the vision of him walking off from Crane up the hill to the next tee last year in our minds whenever his name is mentioned. Although he admits his behavior that day was uncalled for and he later apologized to Crane, it would be unfair to view his career years down the road through the prism of being a hot head. Many people with intense focus in sports are seen as aloof, rude, or overbearing. Hogan, Faldo, and others needed that type of focus to succeed—but they all did it within the acumen of being a gentleman. Sabbatini and Oberholser seem to have discovered what Phil Mickelson took so long to realize: a cool head and focus combined with an enormous amount of natural talent and hard work produce results.

We can all learn a lesson from these events in our own games and act more like gentlemen (or gentlewomen) and keep a cool head. A bad shot is just that—a bad shot and nothing more. For you and me, it's just a few hours of fun. For Sabbatini, Oberholser and the others, it's a way of making a living and a career. Which do you think is more important? We will just have to wait and see if this overhaul pays off when the Majors roll around. And if Pat Perez can learn a thing or two from two of this year's tournament winners....

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Association of America 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 2006.