

Nathan Crace's

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Are Dogwoods and Azaleas from Mars?

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"The PGA Tour has very strict policies against holding events at venues that discriminate. They're being quite hypocritical here, they need to boycott this tournament." This was a quote from National Organization for Women (NOW) president Martha Burke to ESPN news about The Masters. It was yet another salvo in the smoldering debate that is about to ignite into a firestorm of political correctness versus machismo and rights to privacy. You don't think so? You think Hootie Johnson and the folks inside the hallowed gates of Augusta National will stand their ground? Never back down? Think again. It's already started.

It was no surprise that the New York Times weighed in with their opinion against the club, but why do they single out Tiger Woods to stand up for women by boycotting and missing an opportunity to three-peat? Top officials at Citigroup have been second-guessing their long-running sponsorship of the tournament—the VERY pricey sponsorship that helps keep commercials to a minimum for those of us glued to the drama amidst the azaleas and dogwoods on television each spring. You can bet that other sponsors are surely assessing the cost-benefit analysis of staying or going, weighing in or bowing out. And now the debate over Augusta's lack of political correctness has turned to Capitol Hill. George W. Bush's nominee for Treasury Secretary, John Snow, announced he would resign from Augusta National in anticipation of his confirmation by the U.S. Senate. After all, if something tragic were to simultaneously happen to the President, Vice President, Speaker of the House, President pro Tempore of the Senate and the Secretary of State, then the Secretary of the Treasury is next in line—check your copy of the Presidential Succession Law of 1947. We can't have a President who is a card-carrying member of a group of male chauvinists running the country can we?

So who's right and who's wrong? People have been e-mailing me for weeks asking my opinion and to be honest, I've been ducking the issue. Not because I'm afraid of fallout from saying something politically incorrect, but because I don't know what the answer is just yet. No one does. Sure it's Augusta National and that makes it special because, to the game of golf and we golfers anyway, Augusta is such a special place. But it's nothing new. Shoal Creek admitted black members after it came to light that they had none prior to the PGA Championship in 1990. The Hooters restaurant franchise took a lot of heat years ago for hiring only women for waitresses—seriously. Clinton initiated the "don't ask, don't tell" policy for the military. In fact, in recent memory, the only high profile group with exclusive provisions in its membership criteria that has had the nerve to stand up to the pressure of minority groups trying to force inclusion has been the Boy Scouts in their fight to keep out homosexuals.

As far as Augusta is concerned, I can see points from both sides of the issue. Hootie Johnson made a stand at the beginning of all of this and put himself in a position where he cannot afford to back down and still save face. Not smart from a political standpoint, but I'm sure he is doing what he feels deep in his heart is the right thing for the club that elected him chairman. He thinks he's standing up not only for the men at his club, but also for men across America. After all, a number of people see NOW as a group prone to strong-arm tactics and threats of boycotts to make corporate America act the way it wants. Take a look at their web site. They are anti-Wal-Mart, anti-George Bush, and the list goes on and on. Hootie Johnson versus Martha Burke: the immovable object versus the irresistible force. Hootie apparently doesn't care if all of the TV sponsors drop out. He'll just get new ones! But then again, do you really want "The Masters, brought to you with limited commercial interruptions by Maxim Magazine and Blue Star Ointment"? So a group of 300 men at the most prestigious golf club in America that hosts one of the sport's Majors doesn't want women members. The LPGA doesn't allow men to play their Tour. Probably a good thing since the guys on the PGA Tour are not too flattering in shorts and skirts.

I'm afraid I don't see this going anywhere soon with Hootie and Martha squaring off and I also don't see Ms. Burke stepping down from her post at NOW. When former CBS chief executive Thomas H. Wyman became the first member to resign in protest from Augusta National last month after 25 years, he called the club's stand on female members "pigheaded" and claimed that up to a quarter of the 300 members felt the same way. If this is remotely true, it doesn't bode well for Hootie. But whether you think he's right or wrong, you have to respect him for continuing to stand up for what he believes against a very powerful special interest group that keeps corporate America shaking in its boots and looking over its collective shoulder.

The end result may be murky, but a couple of things seem clear to me: (1) Hootie Johnson will fight to the death from the corner into which he has placed himself until he is forced to stepped down by the Club or dies of a heart attack from the stress of dealing with Martha Burke and (2) the game will suffer until the smoke clears. Whatever the resolution may be, I wish it would happen soon. But remember, women do play at Augusta—they just have to be married to a member. So if they do allow female members and some of those new members bring their "wives," one can only assume that Hootie will have to bring in the Boy Scouts for re-enforcements.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect/land planner and a freelance writer whose "Lipouts" column is based, in part, on topics submitted to the author by readers. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2002.