

Jinxes, Curses and the Golf gods

By: Nathan Crace Date: August 25, 2004

There are certain truisms in life. The sky is blue, water is wet, and *Ishtar* may be the worse film ever made. In golf, as in life, there are also truisms—as was proven at Whistling Straits on Sunday afternoon of the 2004 PGA Championship. Hard work pays off and the golf gods will not let a belly putter or “the claw” win a major championship. Not my rule, just fact. And before I get bombarded with e-mails about Bruce Lietzke’s Senior US Open win with a long putter, we’re talking the Grand Slam majors—The Masters, US Open, British Open, and PGA Championship.

With a down to the wire finish at The Masters, a crazy US Open, and another long-shot winner at the British Open (this time winning in a playoff), the conclusion of this year’s PGA Championship had Ernie Els looking like the biggest bride’s maid since Greg Norman’s excruciating streak of misfortune. However, upon closer inspection, Els’ US Open derailed his chances of being the next best thing. Mickelson was in fact only five strokes from a grand slam in 2004—five strokes! But for all of Singh’s hard work and countless hours on the practice range, it was dumping the long putter that made the difference. Vijay returned to the standard putter and won the Buick Open and the PGA Championship. Coincidence? I think not! Just think of what else he could have won in addition to his other wins if he had lost the long putter earlier in the season. The golf gods spoke and he listened.

The same golf gods that are responsible for protecting the history of the game (although they haven’t been spending much time with the ball and equipment restriction committee in Far Hills, New Jersey the past few years) are the ones who have also not allowed a long putter to win a major. And “the claw” putting grip employed by Chris DiMarco that has kept his putting statistics near the top all year was the cruelly ironic undoing of his run in Wisconsin. The golf gods do not like “the claw.” It’s too untraditional. Then again, perhaps it was the *Golf Digest* article featuring DiMarco him earlier in the month that jinxed him.

And while we’re on that topic, that same issue featured Justin Leonard in an article on making clutch putts under pressure. Irony is so ironic! Again, I like Justin Leonard, but I don’t make the rules. It’s akin to the high school football coaches who curse the preseason number one ranking they receive. You just can’t win for being jinxed. Would Leonard have won the PGA if he hadn’t been in *Golf Digest*? Who knows? But it was painfully ironic to see the article on clutch putting when it was the uncharacteristic putting misfires that undid his run in the end. And when his tie-for-second-place finish left him on the outside looking in for the Ryder Cup team, Ryder Cup captain Hal Sutton used one of his captain’s picks for Stewart Cink. That’s no coincidence that Cink leads the Tour in putting.

So with the bulk of the season in the record books now, the highlight that remains is the 35th Ryder Cup at Oakland Hills at the middle of September. As do many other American fans, I would like to see our team bring home the trophy. But if we don’t, I would hope that they don’t get whipped like the 2002 matches in England. Three points in a Ryder Cup is a pretty big win. In fact, it was the biggest margin since the 1985 matches, which Europe and Great Britain won by 5 points; however, not nearly as embarrassing as the 9 point thrashing we put on them in 1981. That was more like Reagan versus Mondale in 1984.

So what the golf gods have in store for the Ryder Cup is anyone’s guess. One thing that is sure, look for the return of Tiger Woods at the Ryder Cup. For all of his complaining about his putting, he is currently second in total putting on the Tour (behind Cink). It’s merely a matter of him finding more fairways. And Sutton’s choice of Cink over the media’s pick of John Daly will just have to play out in Michigan. As he said, he doesn’t pick by emotion—he picks the people he thinks will help him win. You can’t argue with that logic. It is the point of the matches. Just so long as at the end of the day on Sunday of the matches, we don’t end up with another touchy-feely President’s Cup ending like we had in South Africa last year. No concessions to tie for the cup. Make them hole it out and win it outright. Hopefully the golf gods will give that putt to Woods to bring home the cup and silence the critics. Of course, giving Mickelson one more chance to turn a single stroke into a part of history wouldn’t be bad either.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect 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 2003.