

Nathan Crace's

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Pulling for the Underdog

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If you saw any of the 2005 U.S. Open from Pinehurst's famed Number 2 course this year, you couldn't help but get wrapped up in the classic story of David and Goliath with Jason Gore playing the part of David and the rest of the field playing Goliath. Although the Cinderella story came to an abrupt end Sunday afternoon with a final round 84, the throngs of fans who followed Gore around on the weekend as the story became myth and the myth became more plausible proved that the greatest reality show of all is still and will always be sport. Sorry, fans of *The Bachelor*. With the exception of professional wrestling, the 1976 Indiana Hoosier basketball team, and a handful of other dynasties through the years, we never know who is going to win any given game or match on any given day or night.

So why is it we pull for someone like Jason Gore? Is it just because we want to see the exception that makes the rule? Or is it for the same reason we only see the wrecks in the highlights of car racing? Perhaps on some higher plane deep inside our subconscious, we live vicariously through the underdog. If only we could be in his or her shoes. On Saturday night, I really thought Gore was going to pull it off. In fact, I place part of the blame for his collapse on Retief Goosen. Had Gore been paired with Michael Campbell or someone who was playing halfway decent the final eighteen holes, he might not have imploded on Sunday. It must be tough enough to play with the pressure of the world on you in the final pairing of the U.S. Open. Tough enough without watching a member of the so-called "Big Five" and the only person who seemed to be able to handle Pinehurst stumble in with a painful to watch final round 81.

Look at it this way: Goosen's 81 in the final round was akin to a 3 handicap golfer shooting 88 in a pressure situation. The other players in the group have to either completely block him or her out or face the fate of stumbling themselves. Sure, at the level of the U.S. Open the players should be able to avoid the bad play bandwagon, but if Goosen had carded a 73 on Sunday, I say Gore wins the trophy—Michael Campbell's great round notwithstanding.

Flash forward one week to Cherry Hills in Colorado for the Women's U.S. Open and witness teenage phenom Michelle Wie. She and amateur Morgan Pressell seemed on cruise control by the end of the day Saturday, but a mass implosion on behalf of the entire field on Sunday left them on the outside looking in—with Wie carding an uncharacteristic 82 for the final day. Pressell fared much better, but a final-hole bogey paired with eventual winner Birdie Kim's final hole birdie was the proverbial nail in the coffin of the women's version of the Jason Gore story.

Ironically, I sent out an email to a couple of friends before the Men's Open that I thought Tiger Woods and Annika Sorenstam would be tied at two apiece in the hunt for major titles on the way to their respective Grand Slams—and Tiger should have if he could have made a put. But on the greens of Pinehurst, Tiger could have putted off the deck of a battleship and not hit water. He hit a lot of greens in regulation, but I have to agree with Johnny Miller that leading the field in greens hit is a misleading statistic when it leaves you with a birdie putt from forty feet most of the time. And when your putting has left you, as it did for Woods that week, it makes it all the more frustrating. The true indication of Tiger's skill, though, is that he still almost pulled it off despite his trials with the fickle short stick on the slick greens of Pinehurst. But Sorenstam shocked everyone watching with her final round 77.

I admit I was pulling for Wie to pull out the victory in the Women's Open and I would like to see her win the U.S. Pub Links trophy and the automatic invite to the U.S. Open that comes with it. Imagine this scenario (if Wie manages to remain an amateur long enough): Wie somehow wins the U.S. Pub Links this year and gets the spot in the Open for 2006 that comes with the Pub Links title. Then a top 8 finish (including ties) in the Open earns her an automatic spot to the 2007 Masters! And the best part would be that she did it by earning it—and without one protestor or Martha Burke litigating her way into the tournament for her.

Or, if Wie wins the 2005 Pub Links and then in the 2006 Men's U.S. Open, somehow manages to win it too, she gets not only an automatic spot in the 2007 Masters, but also gets to play the first two rounds with the defending champion—2006 winner Jason Gore. Maybe that's a stretch, but as long as we're creating our own made-for-TV movie, then that would be reality television that's actually worth watching!

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 2005.