

Split Decision

By: Nathan Crace Date: October 21, 2003

Surely by now you've heard about the Sophie Gustafson "incident." If not, here's the 4-1-1 in a nutshell: During the final round of the LPGA's Samsung World Championship, Gustafson marked her ball—which had come to rest precariously on a severe slope in the green—and looked over her upcoming putt. She then replaced her ball, stood behind it, took some practice strokes and then "addressed" the ball in her customary fashion. This is where the fun begins. Gustafson says her ball began to oscillate so she backed away. A few seconds later, the ball rolled down the slope—coming to rest some eight feet away from where it originally lay. At question is whether or not she did indeed "address" the ball by soling her club behind the ball before it moved.

According to Rule 18-2b from the Rules of Golf, "if a player's ball in play moves after he has addressed it (other than as a result of a stroke), a player shall be deemed to have moved the ball and shall incur a penalty stroke. The player shall replace the ball unless the movement of the ball occurs after he has begun his swing and he does not discontinue his stroke." But the difference here is that Gustafson stands steadfast that she did not sole her club and therefore did not incur a penalty stroke. What's odd, though, is how a ball can be marked, cleaned, re-marked, and then move eight feet with no outside force exerted upon it. Very strange. Was there a sudden shift in the gravitational pull of the Earth's core at the Woodlands that caused the ball to move? Regardless of whether she soled her putter, could this have been such a monumental coincidence that would cause the ball to spontaneously move at that exact moment in time?

Nonetheless, an LPGA Tour rules official was called over to decide how to proceed and discuss the matter with Gustafson and her playing partner, veteran player Julie Inkster. Inkster would later say she was too busy lining up her own birdie putt to see what happened. However, she did say that she took Gustafson at her word and believed her. Evidently, Gustafson told the official she did not sole her putter and he subsequently instructed her to play from where the ball currently lay with no penalty. NBC (who was televising the event) began pouring over the videotape for the next hour while the Rules Committee looked over the tape as well and even carted Gustafson, Inkster, and their caddies back to the 14th green to relive the event after they finished their round. Meanwhile, other players on the course were grinding along making shot and course management decisions based on the scoreboards that reflected Gustafson's incredible final round 64 and apparent two stroke win. Should they have known about the possibility of the drastic change on that scoreboard that NBC said would be almost a sure two-stroke penalty against Gustafson? Some say "yes", some say "no." As it turns out, that was the least of the debates going on in the NBC tower—and subsequently the nation's television sets.

One NBC commentator aloofly referred to how the whole incident would be placed under an incredible microscope given that Gustafson was currently dating LPGA Tour Commissioner Ty Votaw! This was news to me (and probably others who don't keep up with the behind-the-scenes action on the LPGA Tour), but apparently other Tour players had long ago expressed a concern (presumably in private) that such a situation could arise. However far-fetched the hypothesis, the proverbial can of worms had been opened and they were crawling all over this like tabloid paparazzi. Could Gustafson have been the recipient of a biased ruling in her favor because the rules officials feared for their jobs if the boss's girlfriend were penalized?

I should probably mention at this point that I have a theory about the magnetic attraction between even relatively normal human beings and gossip. It's the "checkout aisle tabloid factor" and here's how it goes: most civilized people wouldn't actually pay for a subscription to the *Weekly World News* (or admit it if they did). However, if you are standing in line at the grocery store and you look over and see a picture of Britney Spears on the cover with her Venetian offspring in her arms, you might spring for the \$2.95 just to amuse yourself. It was this very phenomenon that pointed my browser to the LPGA discussion boards as a voyeur of sorts to read through the ensuing firestorm. Most seemed to leap to Gustafson's defense and those who questioned her integrity were systematically and unilaterally demonized. For the most part, the opinions were split.

When it's all said and done, there was no "Schwarzeneggeresque" recall and the Commissioner's girl walked away with the trophy and the money. This is because the saving grace for the game of golf is that it is still a gentleman's (or woman's) game and the last word is still the player's when the video is "inconclusive." The reason this felt different is because typically the player admits to some mistake, accepts his or her penalty stroke, is commended for it, and continues playing. For some reason, since Gustafson's recollection of events didn't jive with Roger Maltbie's vociferous opinion, we were left questioning her word. Although I know what I think I saw, I do not know if what I saw is what happened. Therefore, I have to do what the Rules officials did—trust the player. Regardless of anyone's opinion, in the end only Gustafson (and probably her boyfriend) will really ever know.

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.