

*** (The Asterisk)***By: Nathan Crace Date: July 16, 2008*

If there's one thing the media these days is quite accomplished in it's marginalizing the very good while glorifying the better than very good. Sensationalizing the mediocre is also a favorite pastime. The difference between great and very good is sometimes not very much (sometimes it's a lot), but when the media attaches itself to someone or something, it does not let go easily. Unless, of course, it is in the media's best interest to do so. Making stories out of nothingness has become an art form in today's gotta-have-it-now world of instant information. The world of sports media is no different, and with all due respect, it must be difficult on a slow day to fill time. I only write this column once a month and could not imagine doing so every day.

Tiger Woods's knee problem was a big story after the US Open, and deservedly so. Especially when he revealed the true depth of the problem he was dealing with and that his season would be ending after the extended trip around Torrey Pines. Of course, the focus turned immediately to the possible end of a shining career. That is a very realistic story line. Tragedy makes news and Tiger's career ending abruptly on a bad knee would be about as tragic a story for the PGA Tour and golf as a whole as anything in recent memory of the game. But then you have the pontificators who want to delve deeper into how bad things could be and how the rest of the guys on Tour will survive. Surely all of the sponsors will pull their money if Tiger is lame. And how could the rest of the guys on Tour live with themselves if they win an event that Tiger was not playing in? How could they say they beat the best when the best is at home tending to his knee?

That brings me to the point of this diatribe. Unfortunately, the editorial deadline for this month is before the Open Championship (or as we call it on this side of the Big Pond, the British Open) kicks off on July 17th. So I can't say how it turns out before I fire this off to the publishers. What I do know is this: if I hear one more person in the media say that whoever wins the Open Championship this year will have an asterisk next to his name because Tiger was not in the field, I may blow out more than my own knee! Is Tiger the best player in the world? Absolutely. Is he always in the hunt in a major? You bet. Is he the greatest to ever play the game? Don't know.....yet. If his knee heals and he returns next year to his former self, all indications would point toward that becoming a reality by the time he retires on his own terms—I don't see Tiger playing the Champions Tour, but I could be wrong.

While he may be the favorite, Tiger does not get the automatic win for every major. To win a major, you still have to play 72 holes (or 91 if you want to beat Rocco Mediate) before they give you the hardware. Tiger's success in majors is indeed impressive, but he has not won every major since he turned pro—it just seems like it. The world does not revolve around Tiger Woods and I would bet that he would be the first to tell you that. Sure television ratings may be down some while he's out, but don't marginalize the guys who are winning in his absence. As the Tour likes to say "These Guys are Good." And then there are the guys from the European Tour and other far reaches of the planet who are pretty good themselves. It's not like Auburn's 1993 11-0 regular season under Terry Bowden when infractions by the previous staff left an indelible asterisk in the record books for that season—keeping the Tigers out of post season play. The number of teams and players in that position in history is seemingly endless, dotted with asterisks for eternity—and everyone knows what that means. But if the best can't make it to the game, you don't tell the other team their win counts less.

The asterisk has become a symbol for something much darker and more foreboding just beneath the surface of an achievement. If Anthony Kim wins the Open this year, he will have earned it—Tiger or not—and deserves better than an asterisk. Of course, the truth is that a win by Mickelson or one of the players in the top 10 in the world rankings would probably garner more attention to the alleged asterisk next to his name because the media will forever wonder if it would have been so if not for an infirmed Woods. Someone winning from nowhere will seem just like a fluke, the alignment of the planets or some such nonsense. But for those guys who keep nipping at Tiger's heels, they will forever be questioning their achievement if not for Tiger's absence. Or so the media would like you to think.

It will be interesting to see how the story lines unfold this week and after Sunday. Hopefully, my crystal ball has it all wrong and they will let the winner revel in his accomplishment. Somehow, I don't think it will happen that way—unless the winner manages a storyline bigger than the asterisk itself. However the winner wins, I hope they don't let the second-guessers get to them. Don't tell the media, but I think Mickelson or anyone else would take a Claret Jug full of asterisks and never think twice about the newfound hardware on the mantel.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Assoc. 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 his archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know or email him at nathan@watermarkgolf.com. Copyright 2008.