

The Defense Rests, Your Honor

By: Nathan Crace Date: January 23, 2004

"Are you prepared to give your opening statement?"

"Yes, your honor," would be the reply, "We are prepared to demonstrate to the court, the jury, and the golf pundits at large that the defendants, Mr. Duval and Mr. Mickelson, are not washed up and, furthermore, we will show why those pundits who would question the defendants decision to devote more time to their families than the world of golf should question their motives."

And so it begins. During a recent bout of what my daughter calls a "mean little stomach bug," I found myself reading a number of golf publications during the day. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) the cable carrier in my town doesn't offer the Golf Channel and—to my dismay—the daytime selection of programming consists primarily of mediocre talk shows, retired judges, and "real" paternity test revelations. And so as I perused the publications at hand, I noticed an article by the veteran golf writer Ron Sirak on page 10 in the January 16, 2004 issue of *GolfWorld* entitled "Lefty and Duval on trial." After reading the accusations with no opportunity afforded to the accused to defend themselves, I elected to take up the case pro bono and herewith provide the following rebuttal.

It is important to note here that I have nothing against Mr. Sirak. I've never met him. I wouldn't know him if I saw him. And, likewise, I'm sure he wouldn't know me. I feel I should say this up front because, for some reason, I get a fair quantity of e-mail accusing me of unfairly attacking people in my columns. That being said, although I agree with some of the points in Mr. Sirak's article, there was one central point that I found unfair and somewhat disturbing. First, the facts that were presented and the points I agree with:

Mickelson was winless in 2003 for only the second time in his professional career (eleven full seasons) and finished 38th on the end of the year money list—his worst ever. In his first seven events of 2003, Mickelson finished in the top 10 five times. A feat he only achieved twice more the rest of the season! Of course, we all know the Duval story: he made only 4 of 20 cuts in 2003 and has not won since his 2001 British Open victory when he appeared poised to dethrone Tiger Woods as the world's number one player.

So what's the good news? As Mr. Sirak pointed out, Mickelson will be 34 years old and Duval 33 before the completion of the 2004 season and the great Ben Hogan didn't even begin the highlight reel of his career until he turned 34—a run that lasted until he was 41 in 1953. Perhaps the best is yet to come and Mickelson and Duval did too much too soon earlier in their careers. Perhaps they are simply at a plateau in their respective careers (although it could be argued that the two respective plateaus are at decidedly different elevations). However, Mr. Sirak claims that Hogan's epiphany was a result of a swing change while Duval and Mickelson are fighting much darker deamons in their hearts and minds.

Could it be that, as we have seen in professional tennis and are beginning to see in other professional sports such as basketball, we have grown so accustomed to greatness at younger ages that Duval and Mickelson seem somewhat over the hill? After all, Tiger Woods had accumulated 39 Tour wins (including 8 Major titles) before he turned 28! Then there' are 24 year-old Charles Howell III, 24 year-old Sergio Garcia, and the 14 year-old Hawaiian phenomenon Michelle Wie to steal the attention of the media's eye. But before we pass Duval and Mickelson off to the Senior Tour, look back last year to Kenny Perry. The 43 year-old Kentucky native collected three convincing victories on the Tour last year and finished 6th on the money list. I wonder how many people questioned his career 10 years ago?

But my point of contention and the most disturbing to me is to question whether Duval and Mickelson's decisions to spend more personal time with their families will lead them to "one day...regret not having maximized their potential as golfers." Far more disturbing would be to have won more tournaments only to look back in ten years and wonder what happened to the years you missed of your children growing up. Ask any career businessperson who has been forced for years to make the decision between that late meeting and a soccer game or skipping a Saturday birthday party because he or she had to finish up the big proposal for Monday. Of course, not everyone has the ability to take time off whenever they so choose to spend time with the family. However, to question the strength of the commitment to their careers for those who do have such opportunity because they are more committed to their families is absurd! As Mr. Sirak notes, Hogan had no children.

To Mr. Sirak's credit, he may not have known that Mickelson's youngest child, Evan, did not breathe for the first seven minutes of life—a situation that could have led to irreversible brain damage. Thankfully, he is fine. Or that his wife, Amy, suffered a life-threatening six-inch tear in a major artery that nearly cost her life if not for the good fortune that a specialist in such cardiovascular repairs was within minutes of the hospital. That's enough to make anybody sit back and assess which is more important to you as a human being: career or family?

In fact, in a recent study of Americans who voluntarily took on a "downshift" in their careers that entailed earning less money, 55% of those surveyed considered their lifestyle change to be permanent and 85% are happy with the change they made. Luckily for them, they do not live in the public spotlight and endure the scrutiny of celebrity. However, this is an important fact to note because it reflects the greater understanding that although you must take care of your career because it takes care of your family; if you must choose between the two, the happiness of your family is much more important than the happiness of your fans and the sporting world.

Hopefully, when Tiger and Elin Woods have a couple of little ones running around Isleworth in ten years and Tiger decides to take some time off to run the kids to Chuck E. Cheese, the next generation of golf writers will cut him some slack. The defense rests, your honor.

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 2004.