

The Man Behind “Da Man”

By: Nathan Crace Date: July 21, 2002

The following is a truism: Tiger Woods is the best golfer in the world. Period. End of discussion. And, being a truism, no one with even the slightest sign of brain activity would stand to argue with that fact. The following is an aphorism: Behind every great man, there is a woman. Generally speaking, yes. But in the case of the truism above, you may have some arguments from people who have followed Mr. Woods' career since 2000—the year he hired Steve Williams to carry his bag week in and week out. In no other sport is there a relationship between the player and his closest confidant like we see in professional golf. Typically, in the world of sports, you are either completely alone or you have a team—except, in some ways, in professional golf. Baseball, basketball, football, and hockey all come complete with teammates and coaches. But in professional golf, a strangely complex relationship between golfer and caddie has emerged since the days of Ben Hogan—when professional caddies were unheard of due to the expense involved. In fact, players couldn't even bring their own caddies to the U.S. Open until 1976 or the Masters until as late as 1983. Now, a player's caddie is a key component. Part pack mule, part analyst, part weatherman, part travel agent, and part best friend. Of course, a player's caddie can't step in for a few holes to give the player a breather on the bench, but he (or she) is there to do all of the little things that players today don't have to worry about: deducing yardages, cleaning clubs, and perhaps most importantly, providing moral support and a psychological reassurance for the millions of thoughts racing through the golfer's head on any given shot.

With that being said, why haven't more people given caddies their due? Nick Faldo's long-time caddie Fanny Sunneson got a lot of press when Faldo was winning every major. Undoubtedly, the media was swept up in the idea that a woman could tote the bag for such a successful player. Even Lee Trevino's caddie for so many years received a great deal of attention—perhaps because he was such a large man. Trevino used to joke that he could have Herman stand uphill of the cup on the green to help flatten out the break. Now that Tiger Woods is the top player in the world and wins nearly every major he tees it up in, his caddie seems to elude the limelight—and that's just fine with his caddie. In fact, his avoidance of the cameras and willingness to let the press focus on the real star is part of what makes him the best caddie in the world—a perfect fit for the best player in the world. However, what appears to be the key in making the team of Tiger Woods and Steve Williams so successful to those of us outside the inner circle is their apparent friendship. A real friendship that surely extends well beyond the ropes.

Williams is no stranger to having high profile players for bosses. He looped for Greg Norman from 1980 until a couple of months after the 1989 Masters. The story is that Williams wanted Norman to hit a 3-wood off the tee on 18 on Sunday, but Norman hit 1-iron. Williams told him to hit a 4-iron for his ensuing approach, yet Norman opted for a 5-iron that landed short and rolled back down the fairway. Norman missed the playoff by one stroke. Williams' calm demeanor and ability to stay out of the way was balanced with an assuredness he gave his players that he knew the right club for each shot. He was soon dismissed. Who knows if Norman grew tired of being the one to blame, but Ray Floyd appreciated Williams' sudden unemployment. He would carry Floyd's bag for 11 years—giving Floyd the type of reassuring attitude he needed. Williams was consistent and kept to his routine on every shot, every hole, every day.

Then came the 1999 Nissan Open and a “difference of opinion” between Woods and his caddie Mike “Fluff” Cowan in the parking lot at Riviera Country Club. According to some reports, Cowan's inability to keep private matters from the Woods camp in the inner sanctum and out of the press may have been part of the problem. Or perhaps it was his zeal for the limelight. Remember the commercials for Comfort Inn with Cowan popping out of his suitcase? For whatever the reason, it seemed to be fate for both Williams and Woods. Floyd, who was starting to play less anyway, was approached by Woods' coach Butch Harmon and Floyd agreed to let them talk to Williams. The rest, as they say, is history.

There is little doubt that Williams' successful careers with Norman, Floyd, and of course Woods have made him a very wealthy man. Although no one knows for sure how much that is, it is apparently enough for the New Zealand native to own his own racing team and homes in both Oregon and New Zealand. According to some reports, his career with Woods alone ranks him as the highest paid sports figure in New Zealand! Then there is the record that Williams himself owns: the only caddie to own a Grand Slam—he was on the bag for at least one of each of Woods' Grand Slam titles at the Masters, U.S. Open, British Open, and PGA Championship. However, given Woods' third round 81 on Saturday at this year's British Open, Williams won't have to worry about repeating that feat in the 2002 calendar year. That too is a truism.

Nathan Crace is the Senior Design Associate at Maxwell Golf Group in Jackson, Mississippi. His freelance “Lipouts” column is based, in part, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2002.