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The Reality Race to the Finish

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By now, everyone who has seen the PGA Tour on television knows what the FedEx Cup is—even if you don't know how to calculate the point system. It was a season-ending system with a big payout intended to keep the interest of viewers who normally migrate to college and pro football on the weekends during the fall months. Not surprisingly, the FedEx Cup winner was the world's number one ranked player Tiger Woods. It would have been more of a surprise if *el Tigre* had not won the FedEx Cup after running away with the regular season. Add to that the United States' win in the President's Cup and one could reasonably assume that the inaugural race for the cup and its intended purpose of holding viewer share was a success. Then something strange happened—the season continued.

Of course, this was nothing new. There have always been events into the fall, but there was a palpable anti-climatic feel to these tournaments. Woods could have forfeited some of his winnings and still kept the money title and the points race was an apparent moot point by this point. So why would anyone watch? And why didn't the FedEx Cup race end with the end of the season? Most can figure out the answer to the latter question. While some may have been turned off from the closing months of play and the tournaments were noticeably devoid of the world's top tier of players, I have always felt the end of the season is more interesting than the rest of the season for one simple reason—survival.

Forget the reality shows so many Americans waste hours of their sedentary lives watching during prime time. The end of the PGA Tour season is real life survival for many players hovering near the bottom of the season's cut line on the money list. Quite simply, if you find yourself on the outside of the number, you find yourself without a Tour card the next year—unless you've earned some other exemption. Though the coverage may be limited and the PGA Tour's powers-that-be feel like it doesn't make for good television, I would rather watch these guys playing to keep their cards than watch Tiger, Phil, Ernie, and Vijay go shot for shot in the final round of the Mercedes Championship.

Then there are some people who think the end of the season is not worth watching because of the lack of the big names. Some even think that Woods and company owe a debt of gratitude to the fans of the latter tournaments by showing up and playing at least some of them. While it would be great for tournament revenues for Woods or Mickelson to show up at the Viking Classic in Mississippi or the Valero Open in Texas, I wouldn't hold my breath. These tournaments still do a great job of supporting charities and there's no lack of players willing to fill up the fields. And on the flip side of that argument, those same guys trying to keep their cards probably wouldn't want the top ten players showing up either while they are trying to keep their cards. It could be seen as unfair for Woods to show up to play the Ginn sur Mer Classic at Tesoro, lap the field, and fly off in his private jet with the winner's check—leaving the guys near the money cut line missing money from the purse.

Besides, players like Fred Funk, Justin Leonard, Jerry Kelly, Sean O'Hair and company are no slouches. And if you believe the mantra that "these guys are good," there is still some great golf to watch and real drama to unfold. I played in the Wednesday pro-am a couple of years ago at the then Southern Farm Bureau Classic and trust me, these guys are good and just as much fun to watch as the "big names." To some degree, they are also more approachable because they can be more approachable. Most still fly commercial and use the courtesy cars to and from the course instead of private helicopters. And even though they play an entirely different game than 99.9% of the amateurs who watch them, they are the types of people fans feel they can relate to and connect with.

As anti-climatic as the Fall Series may feel because it is not marketed the way the pre-FedEx Cup portion of the season is promoted, there is a reason to watch. So don't worry about why the stars don't show up, watch your NFL games on Sunday afternoon, and watch the golf in primetime. As much as the FedEx Cup might help to pad a guy's bank account, watching them fight for the cards is much more exciting to me. And much more real than any reality show on television today—except for maybe "America's Most Smartest Model."

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. Copyright 2007.