

COMMENTARY

The U.S. Open



A lot of smart people have talked or written about golf, and a lot of smart people have written about baseball and horse racing and boxing and fishing and hunting, too, if you think Ernest Hemingway and his progeny are smart.

Somehow those sports, more than others, have attracted witty pundits, people who see them not only as elegant exercises in themselves, perhaps, but as life models. Especially in golf, they use the sport as a metaphor for religion, race, sex, clothing fashions and office politics — or any other kind of politics.

Countless other people try to say smart things about golf, too, and fail. So maybe these wise guys just can't resist the chance to offer something obviously much smarter than the average dummy (which describes most of us) can spit out.

Dan Quayle, for example — arguably the dumbest elected official ever to win a door key to the White House between 1789 and 2000 — once pointed out this rather obvious truth: "In golf, you keep your head down and follow through. In the vice presidency, you keep your head up and follow through. It's a big difference."

He was no Bob Hope, who said, "Drugs are very much a part of professional sports today but when you think about it, golf is the only sport where the players aren't penalized for being on grass." After reading

Quayle, I have assiduously avoided locating any comments made by George W. Bush about golf.

But when I saw the photograph of two golfers in the national press Monday morning — the picture of a handsome black man named Tiger Woods shaking hands with a handsome white man named Rocco Mediate, I couldn't resist writing about it.

What clinched it, for me, was the fact that my mother called in mid-afternoon to tell me that Tiger and Rocco were running a dead heat at the 15th hole — this was about 2 p.m., as the whatdoyoucallit, the playoffs, the overtime, the kill round, the extra-18, the extra innings, the post 72, the extra greens, ah, the overtime holes, whatever it is — were drawing to a dramatic conclusion.

My own mother. I was stunned.

Not only has she seen none of the world for the last 35 years (blind at 45 is her story, which means I still look 20 to her, thank God), but she'd grown up on a remote cattle ranch about 30 miles from the nearest town and maybe 500 or 1,000 miles from the nearest golf course, in the top of Colorado. If that wasn't enough, she married a man whose take on golf and golfers was roughly the equivalent of Robin Hood's take on the Sheriff of Nottingham, and his rich cronies.

That did it. I figured I had to write about it.

What my mother really liked about these two vastly wealthy young men (Rocco, at 45, would have been the oldest player ever to win the U.S. Open, but what's a decade or two among friends) was their good sportsmanship. Each rich kid, if I may call them that, said nice things about the other, and my mother approved. I think Rocco said that Tiger would play even if he had to crawl from one green to the next (poor guy has a bad knee), and Tiger said that everybody on the tour just loved "the Rock," you

couldn't ask for a better guy.

What I liked was the obvious reflection of an America that has changed utterly from my youth, when I lived in a country that practiced apartheid as effectively as South Africa did until Nelson Mandela left prison. In those days, black men and white men did not play each other on a U.S. Open course.

Both men were dressed darkly — Tiger in a dark skin under a black cap and red shirt, and Rocco in a light skin under a black cap and a dark shirt. Both of them appeared trim, both of them displayed entire boulevards of pearly whites so flawless in their huge smiles that God must have lent each his a personal set of dentine perfection, for the day.

And both of them were unapologetic capitalists, too, so what more could you want from the sport of Republicans and Kings?

They wore the kind of ball caps that serve as high-paying billboards for companies that sell sports equipment from atop the heads of famous golfers with no DUIs or politically incorrect liaisons.

But after all that, I decided not to write it. Absolutely not, and for good reason.

Late in the afternoon, as my column deadline approached like an errant drive whistling in toward my temple from a couple of hundred yards out, and an afternoon storm knocked out the power at my house, and one of the hours-old ducklings I was supposed to be protecting for my St. Francisian wife got eaten by a cat, and my youngest son insisted he be allowed to run naked in the rain outside — lightning be damned, I had to confront the other big problem: I don't know anything about golf, except that it can bring a black man and a white man together in a sudden death play-off, and that's fine by me.

Then at 4:30 p.m., when the only editor I've ever known who does not scream,

pout, shout or cry when you're 30 minutes over deadline, was not screaming into my phone, my mom called back, all the way from Colorado.

"Well, Tiger won, sudden death," she said. "I don't know what that means, but that's what they said."

Tiger won the U.S. Open. I got it from my mother. And I was back on, by God.

I was going to write through and finish, even if "sudden death" was the result. I had nothing to complain about, after all, not even a bad knee. If Tiger could do it, I could do it. And I knew something about golf courses, if not golf.

Long ago, I spent a lot of time on golf courses, but that was always to run. I started at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, home of the Second Marine Division, where somebody had thoughtfully built a golf course. I could go out there and run 10 miles before dawn, without really having to see where I was going, and there were always a few other Marines who were out there doing the same thing, I think. None of them looked like golfers to me, but what do I know?

Wherever I went after that, which was all over the place, I looked for golf courses, and ran them. I've been to a driving range a couple of times with golfing friends, and once I actually followed a guy around a course and took a few swings. I didn't hit anything — golf balls, people, carts, trees, ponds or anything else — but I did take a few swings.

And now I'm writing about the U.S. Open.

So let me leave you with this golf thought, from a smart guy (maybe Alex Hay, they say). "Fifty years ago, 100 white men chasing one black man across a field was called the Ku Klux Klan. Today, it's called the PGA Tour." ■

 **Edison**
NATIONAL BANK

 **Bank of the Islands**

**Traditional service
with innovation.
Teamwork makes
it happen.**

— John Ammons, Vice President

— Leah Kirby, Vice President

Combining tradition with innovation is our strategy for providing exemplary customer service while constantly searching for "a better way" to provide all your banking needs.

Free checking, online banking and bill pay, and an expanded ATM network, are just a few examples of our convenient and innovative services. Call today to learn about these free services and experience the benefits of joining Edison National Bank and Bank of the Islands. We make banking about you.

 An Equal Housing Lender • Member FDIC



13000 S. Cleveland Ave.
Fort Myers, FL 33907
239.466.1800

2105 First St.
Fort Myers, FL 33901
239.334.4668

1699 Periwinkle Way
Sanibel Island, FL 33957
239.472.7211