

He Is Who We Thought He Was

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, April 17 2013 6:00 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, April 17 2013 8:15 AM



The whole Tiger Woods cheating episode that bridged Friday night into Saturday morning this past weekend reminded me so much of Kramer's confrontation with former major league ballplayer Steve Genderson over the improper cleaning of the golf ball during a round. Its outcome may have spurred Genderson to commit murder but it most certainly prompted Elaine to ask why Kramer was such a stickler for such a silly rule. Kramer says "a rule is a rule. Let's face it. Without rules, there's chaos."

Exactly, and now the golf world has chaos and as usual Woods is at its center.

The Masters looks bad and Woods looks worse but yea I suppose if Woods had won then Nike could have run more of its tone deaf "winning takes care of everything" ad featuring Woods crouched over a putt and everyone would have had a good chuckle. Enough is enough. Winning doesn't take care of everything. It doesn't even take care of anything. This isn't Machiavelli and the ends don't justify the means.

Whatever adulation Woods still gets is still undeserved. His massive character flaws, make Don Draper look like Pope Francis. The only thing that I puzzle over, but then only for a moment, is why so many want to give Woods a pass? Heck, they aren't giving him a pass, they have

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created the mess he's become.

Masters officials, in concert with the like minded commercially driven officials at the USGA, conspired to contort the rules they are supposed to guard so that their meal ticket, Woods, could play the weekend in the Masters. Woods drives ratings because he's so talented and because he's such a train wreck. Truth be told, the only thing more compelling than watching Woods at the top of his game is watching Woods try to overcome another self-created hot mess. We shouldn't be surprised by Woods. His integrity has long been shot. We should be surprised by the Masters and USGA officials. They were our last, best hope.

Let's pour over the facts again, because I'm a lawyer by trade and I think it's sometimes best to just let the facts and the reasonable inferences from them tell the story.

When Woods' third shot on the 15th hole in Friday's second round of the Masters hit the flagstick and spun back in the water, he had to take a drop. Bad break, but it happens. Woods had options including dropping the ball within two club lengths of the point where the ball first crossed the hazard. He also had the option to replay the shot from his previous spot. He chose neither. Instead he intentionally (his words) chose to drop it two yards behind his original spot and did so for the sole purpose of giving himself an advantage for his next shot. Again, in his words, he figured that if he could hit exactly the same shot again but from two yards further away he wouldn't risk hitting the flag stick again and then would be in a position to make bogey. Woods may have been humblebragging about his skills considering how ludicrous it all sounded, but then again things pretty much went as described and Woods ended up with a bogey.

As even the most casual golfer now knows, Woods' dropped violated the rules. It's a two stroke penalty which he was required to add to his final score. When he didn't do so, he ended up attesting to a score he didn't achieve. That carries one of the most known penalties in golf: automatic disqualification. There's no grey area about that. None. Zero. Ask Roberto Di Vincenzo. He knows better than anyone.

The red herring in all of this is that the Masters (not Woods, but the Masters) claims it didn't find out about the rules infraction until someone called it in. But that's only half the story. According to one of the most convoluted explanations I've ever read (courtesy of Monday's Wall Street Journal via the powers that be at the Masters), the Masters' officials, unbeknownst to Woods, fielded the call, considered the evidence and decided Woods didn't violate the rules before

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Woods even finished his round. They never bothered to ask him about it.

If you follow tournament golf, you already can surmise that this explanation doesn't make sense. The protocol is to talk to the player about the situation before he signs his scorecard and get his view of the matter. That allows for a full airing of the issue and avoids having the player possibly sign an incorrect scorecard. That they chose not to highly suggests that the situation didn't unfold as they suggest. To put a sharper point on it, had the protocol been followed they would have learned directly from Woods what he had done, the penalty would have been properly assessed and the scorecard that he signed would have been correct. Woods would have been clear of any controversy whatsoever.

Now it could be that the Masters' officials screwed it up by not talking to Woods first and had they just said that, they'd be off the hook though Woods wouldn't. But they don't admit to that kind of error, either. What they claim is that they didn't bother to even revisit the matter until someone told them what Woods said in his press conference. That put them in a real pickle. Having decided to look the other way on a potential disqualifying action by the world's number one player, here was that player now forcing them to revisit the matter and in the most uncomfortable way possible by admitting in intimate detail exactly how he violated the rules though Woods never put it in those terms.

So what did they do next? They pulled out the newly amended decision about what happens when someone calls into a network to report a violation. A few years ago the USGA and the Royal and Ancient Golf Club in Britain, the two bodies charged with developing the rules, came out with a decision that essentially says that if someone watching a tournament on television sees a violation that the player didn't otherwise acknowledge, it will be a 2-stroke penalty and not a disqualification for signing an incorrect scorecard if the player and the officials at the tournament couldn't discern at the time that a violation occurred. They used that as a way to give Woods the pass they already had decided to give him anyway even though that phone call that supposedly started this mess (which, in fact, it did not) was the least important event in the entire time line.

The purpose of the rule the Masters relied on, in a vacuum, is to allow for context to inform situations that would have gone unnoticed but for cameras being perched everywhere, especially at major tournaments. For example, if a television camera catches a player's ball having moved from its prior resting spot but the player never notices it (maybe he's still engrossed in club selection) nor do the rules officials following the group, then it seems to make sense to assess a 2-stroke penalty in retrospect and not the more draconian result of disqualification.

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But this wasn't that situation, not even close. No context is even needed. Indeed it is completely irrelevant that someone called in the violation by Woods. The fact is that Woods described in vivid detail exactly what he had done to a room full of reporters. When an official heard that admission they knew they had to revisit the situation because it was only a matter of time before an inquiring reporter with a working knowledge of the rules would have asked the question. Actually they knew more. They knew they had to disqualify him unless there was another way. That there wasn't didn't deter them in the least. Square peg met round hole and was pounded in thusly.

Obviously Woods didn't realize he was ratting himself out for violating the rules, though he should have. Woods isn't your typical weekend golfer, not by a long shot. He's played thousands of rounds and has likely confronted virtually every situation that one could uncover. Let's recall one of the more infamous situations where Woods, well schooled on the rules, used them to his distinct and legal advantage.

In 1999 during the final round of the Phoenix open, Woods hit his tee shot on the 13th hole into the desert and it came to rest near a boulder. Woods cleverly sought out a rules official and asked if the boulder was considered a movable object. The reason he asked is that he knew that movable objects, even if they're boulders, can be moved unless embedded. The boulder, lying harmlessly in the desert, did not look embedded to Woods but he wanted to be sure. When the rules official told him that it was movable, Woods, again invoking the rule book, asked if he could get some help from the crowd to move the boulder because it weighed, by some estimates, about a ton. The official said he could. The crowd was eager to help, moved the boulder and Woods went on to birdie the hole.

This context is important. It shows that Woods well knows the rules of the game, even the more esoteric ones.

Now back to Friday's Masters round. The rule about re-playing a shot from the original spot comes up in a number of contexts. It not only applies when a ball is hit in a hazard but also, for example, when it's hit out of bounds, something Woods has done probably hundreds of times in his career. In other words, he knows that he's supposed to replay the shot from the same spot. He did not.

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There have some who have come to the defense of Woods but most of those have focused on the supposedly new rule that came into effect about two years ago. But their focus is misplaced. It would be relevant if Woods had never described the situation to the reporters, the call came in from a viewer, and the officials decided the drop was wrong. In that case and only in that case would a 2-stroke penalty and not a disqualification have been justified.

Another one who came to Woods' defense was David Feherty the former pro turned irreverent golf commentator. He said this was a silly controversy but not because of the supposedly new rule but because every pro out on the tour does the same thing—drops the ball a few feet away on a re-hit instead of in the same spot. In other words, per Feherty everyone violates the rule so Woods shouldn't be singled out. Bullshit.

First of all, Feherty's claim is untrue. It simply isn't the case that professional golfers routinely flaunt the rules. It's the exact opposite. Golfers, professional and otherwise, call violations on themselves all the time that no one would ever have seen. It's a bedrock principle of the game and one that makes it unique from virtually any other sport. Second, consider Feherty's words in light of his role. He's a commentator on a network that televises most of the tournaments. He runs into Woods several times a year. Do you think Feherty wants the burden of incurring Tiger's wrath by saying that Woods should have been disqualified? Feherty remembers how Peter Kostis was shunned for months by Woods because Kostis criticized Woods' rebuilt swing a few years ago.

Woods is an imposing, intimidating figure. He's also a really bad guy and a serial cheater (by his own admission and when it comes to women) who has no respect for the game or its traditions. He's still the truculent loner who has been able to shit on anyone just because of his otherworldly golf skills and does so with impunity.

The breaks in golf, as in life, don't have some predestined way of evening themselves out. Woods will continue to win golf tournaments, if/when he surpasses Nicklaus' record of 18 majors won it will be celebrated. But even that won't obscure who Woods really is. He's Don Draper: a talented guy who pursues whatever and wherever at the expense of the soul he seemingly lacks. Nike may want everyone to believe that winning takes care of everything, but that's because they have product to sell. Winning can't change Woods. He is exactly what we know him to be.