

The Problem With Armchair Officials

By Lane Osborne

Padraig Harrington was recently disqualified in the Abu Dhabi Championship after he inadvertently bumped his golf ball when picking up his ball mark. He failed to replace the ball after it moved marginally and his failure to do so, noticed and reported by a TV viewer, led to his disqualification for signing an incorrect scorecard.

Camilo Villegas had a similar situation take place when he was playing in The Tournament of Champions in Kapalua after he hit a pitch shot that started to roll back down the hill toward him and he began clearing loose impediments out of the way. Like Harrington, he too, was disqualified for the rules violation after a TV viewer contacted tour officials about the infraction...after Villegas had already signed his card.

Last year, Juli Inkster was disqualified from the Safeway Classic when, while waiting for half an hour between shots on the tenth hole, she took out a "doughnut" weight, slid it on a club and swung it to stay loose. And, you guessed it, a TV viewer called in the rules violation which led to her disqualification.

These incidents are not new phenomena on the tour. There is a long history of TV viewers who have decided the outcomes of tournaments past.

In 1987, Craig Stadler was playing in the Andy Williams Open at Torrey Pines and faced a shot from under a tree that he elected to play standing on his knees. Instead of dirtying the knees of his pants, Stadler placed a towel down, knelt down on the towel, and hit the shot. A television viewer, turned armchair official, called into tour officials complaining that Stadler had violated a rule by "building a stance."

In 1991, Paul Azinger had a comparable experience when he found his ball half submerged on the eighteenth hole at the Doral Ryder Open. He moved loose stones with his feet while assuming his stance within the hazard. An armchair official saw the violation, called officials, and Azinger's tournament was done.

In lieu of recent inadvertent rules violations on tour, Jack Nicklaus offered that, "Probably the whole book of the rules of golf should be changed." He went on to say that "it should be common sense, but common sense never seems to prevail."

While I agree with Nicklaus that the USGA Rules Book can be akin to reading IRS tax code and needs some simplification, the most common sense place to start, to me, is not allowing TV viewers to determine the outcome of a sporting event. Mistakes happen on the PGA Tour. Rules violations happen. However, I have never seen a tour player intentionally cheat. I'm not sure that the same could be said of the armchair officials. In fact, I've played golf with more than a few armchair officials that are overly critical of tour players and their "ignorance" of the rules of golf. They usually voice these complaints after they pocket a three-foot gimme putt, slide their putter in their bag with 17 other clubs, and write down a five instead of a six because they're playing "winter rules."

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