

Salt of the Earth

By Lane Osborne

Waggle. Waggle. Waggle. Waggle. Waggle. Waggle. Kevin Na can't pull the trigger at the 2012 Player's Championship. So he backs away, yells at himself, addresses the ball again, and then waggles some more. It's excruciating to watch and, no doubt, more painful for Na to endure. Some members of the gallery wince, they feel for him...others heckle, call him a head case, a hack, or worse. But the detractors don't affect Na. He's his harshest critic and he's brutally honest in his assessment of his game. Despite any self-doubt, Na leads after the third round at the Player's. Earlier in the week he acknowledged his slow, idiosyncratic play with humility and humor.

"There's a lot on the line tomorrow," he said, before touting the benefit of being in the final pairing. "But the nice thing is I'm not slowing anyone down behind me, because I'm the last group."

It's difficult not to sympathize with Na. He could be you, or me facing the TPC at Sawgrass, facing the gallery of onlookers, the murmurs from the crowd, facing the demons. The difference between us and Na is that he's won on the Asian Tour, the Nationwide Tour, and the PGA Tour, he's ranked 49th in the world, and has over twelve million dollars in career earnings all while having to overcome himself.

In addition to endless waggles, it isn't uncommon for Na, after having addressed the ball, to take a full practice swing, missing his Titleist by millimeters. It always catches spectators off guard with an audible gasp, thinking he's whiffed the ball entirely. "That's one," they might think to themselves, but it's apparently just Na trying to work up the courage to actually make contact with the ball. Who knows what's going on between Na's ears, the number of negative thoughts that swirl inside his head.

Sergio Garcia battled similar demons at one point in his career, wagging the club so many times during the 2002 U.S. Open at Bethpage Black that one day a member of the unforgiving New York onlookers yelled, "Hey, Sergio! How 'bout let the group behind play through?" The gallery laughed derisively and Sergio responded by flipping them off...one of the few birds he made that day.

You won't see Na respond that way any time soon. It's not in his nature. Na didn't win at the Player's, but it's inevitable that he'll find his way to the top of another leader board soon. He's too talented not to.

"Na" is also the symbol on the periodic table for sodium, a basic building block for our most fundamental of seasonings, which seems apropos given that Kevin Na seems to be a salt of the earth kind of guy.

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