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Selected Guest Editorial: Leadership...on the Golf Course

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Leadership ... on the Golf Course

– *Ritch K. Eich, Member of the JVBL International Editorial Board*

True leadership in the boardroom, the classroom, and yes, on the golf course, demands civility, respect for others, proper deportment, and attention to etiquette. As a rule, golf clubs, whether public or private, take a dim view of bad behavior that violates traditional rules of civility and etiquette. In fact, it is this very atmosphere of mutual respect and dignified demeanor among members and guests alike that draws many fans to golf.

So, why is bad behavior like public drunkenness an increasingly acceptable condition during an increasing number of high-visibility tournaments? Clearly, this behavior is not representative of golf, a game, by the way, that is often called “the game of kings.”

Rory McIlroy, a four-time PGA champion, recently commented on the poor behavior of many fans in a recent article by ESPN Senior Writer Bob Haring, noting that more fans now felt emboldened to yell out questions and comments to him from the gallery. McIlroy suggested that at least part of the problem was the easy availability of alcohol, especially hard liquor cocktails. The article went on to quote several other well-recognized golfers including Tiger Woods, Justin Thomas, and Hideki Matsuyama, who recounted their own experiences of dealing with obnoxious behaviors including heckling and loud talk in the gallery, much of it no doubt fueled by excessive drinking.

So, what is driving such disrespectful behavior? Everyone will have his or her own pet theories on this, but perhaps the divisive, even abusive nature of today’s public discourse – especially as it applies to politics – has finally filtered down to the golf course. After all, we are all saturated daily – whether through social media apps or clicking through the various news channels – by all manner of rude, disrespectful, or even hateful comments about the opinions and beliefs from those on “the other side.” If you’re paying attention, even just a little, it’s absolutely exhausting and frankly, distressing.

This growing barrage of unruly, toxic behavior affects golf fans just like anyone else, and it is having a wholly predictable and contagious impact in my considered judgment. After all, it seems as if it’s a lot easier to do something you know is wrong or “out of character” when everyone else is doing it. If many of your political leaders are openly vandalizing our democratic values including the first amendment; undermining the most basic principles of trust as well as traditionally accepted forms of ethical and moral behavior; then, doesn’t it follow that it’s no doubt easier to be indolent and unquestioning and shamelessly join the wrecking crew?

In the past, it was our collective sense of what we often defined as inappropriate behavior and the personal guilt we felt when we exhibited it to help keep society in check. As Roman statesman Lucius Annaeus Seneca (5 BC – 65 AD) is quoted as saying, “Shame may restrain

what law does not prohibit.” Doesn’t it sometimes seem as if all that is dashed away so that practically anything goes including public drunkenness and undignified behavior during golf matches?

In organizational behavior and communication courses I’ve taught at business schools, with all due respect to Seneca, I’ve used the term *guilt* rather than shame. Without drawing too fine a line between the two, I believe guilt can be constructive but shame can more often be destructive. Simply put, the former is about feeling about how we acted while the other is more about our inner self. In many ways, feeling guilty can help remind us that there are longstanding societal expectations and norms; shame can often connote a deeper emotion like a basic flaw in our character.

McIlroy’s criticism of fan behavior in the article was moderated and respectful, aside from the generalized advice to avoid obvious inebriation during tournaments. But perhaps players themselves could do more to model respectful ways for interaction during tournaments and reestablish more productive behavioral guidelines through leadership. Here are some suggestions that could be adopted during both practice rounds and in tournaments:

- When the pros approach the tee box or are just about at the green, encourage them to lift up their heads and smile, nod and say, “thanks for your help” to the volunteers, or “thanks for coming” to those in the gallery.
- When the gallery applauds a great shot, the golfers should smile more often at the gallery and tip their cap.
- When the pro heads to the practice range or to the practice tee before or after he or she plays, simply acknowledge the crowd gathered there in some pleasant way.
- When the would-be pro is in qualifying school (Q School), include a module about how etiquette – especially to those numerous fans who travel some distance to the venue, pay handsomely to either volunteer at the tournament or buy expensive tickets to park and watch – has been historically an important part of the game.
- When the pros complete their round, encourage them to spend 10-15 minutes greeting families, especially those with small children, and signing autographs.
- The owners of the clubs where tournaments take place, the leaders of the PGA Tour, and corporate leaders whose companies sponsor hospitality tents and suites, advertise and hold a myriad of promotions at major golf courses need to step up to the tee and take greater responsibility for their patrons and fans and eject those who won’t behave.

Big money is clearly at stake on today’s PGA Tour (which is clearly important as many community non-profit organizations benefit directly from tournament proceeds) and improving how fans behave can only help the golfers stay focused on their game. These suggested changes would further the mission of the daily duffer and the PGA pro alike; enable all to better enjoy a day at a regular PGA Tour stop; and remind us all of the importance of behaving as responsible fans and classy citizen-leaders.



About the Author

Ritch K. Eich, Ph.D. (Michigan) and his wife, Joan, have served as volunteer marshals at numerous PGA Tour events around the U.S. in the past 20 years. Eich is a Captain, U.S. Naval Reserve (ret) and author of four leadership books – the latest is **LEADERSHIP CPR: Resuscitating the Workplace through Civility, Performance and Respect** published by Redwood Publishing. He spent most of his career as an executive in corporate and university medical center posts and has served on more than a dozen boards of directors and trustees. He chaired the board of trustees at Los Robles Hospital and

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