When 'Go for It' Goes Wrong

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Phil Mickelson's recent collapse to lose the U. S. Open was an ugly sight to behold—almost as atrocious as Jean Van de Velde's disconnect on the final hole to give away the British Open in 1999. What they had in common were a number of mental errors made under pressure, as well as an attitude.

The attitude was that "going for it," or playing aggressively, was the way to win in style no matter how huge the risk or consequences. The more risk, the better you look when you come out ahead. That is, if you come out ahead.

Mickelson had been dodging bogey bullets all day. He'd hit only two fairways and yet had managed to still be leading by two strokes with two holes to play. Standing on the 17th tee, you'd think it might have occurred to him and his caddy that he'd been wild with his driver, that it was time to stop tempting the golf gods, and that the smart thing to do was play conservatively to insure victory.

You'd think he'd recall how his improved course management had helped him to win two major championships and use this memory to resist the adrenaline rush and the devil's voice to pull out the driver.

The irony is that with his nine days of on-site preparation, detailed hole by hole notes, consulting coaches Rick Smith and Dave Pelz daily, and heavy reliance on his caddy, Mickelson still managed to revert back to his aggressive style of play in the heat of battle. Under pressure, even the best players tend to repeat their habitual mistakes—and that is exactly what Mickelson did.

His caddy should have refused to let Phil hit driver on the last two holes. He should have handed him his four wood or 3 iron and walked away with the clubs. Instead, we almost had to hide our eyes from the ensuing meltdown. It was like watching the final scenes of a reality version of the movie Tin Cup.

Mickelson's fans and even some sports writers have written they love Phil's style, no matter what the result. To me, this is just foolish. They don't understand competitive golf or what it means to be in a position to win a major championship. Nor do they understand the mental errors that occur under pressure.

To suggest that we "need" Mickelson's dare-devil show of bravado to counter the more mechanical and level-headed Tiger Woods is like saying that the Romans "needed" their gladiators to be jousting and then thrown to the lions for their entertainment. Mickelson's job was to win the championship—not to thrill his fans doing it. And certainly not to be devoured by the lions of disgrace, shame and humiliation.

His "go for it" style of play may be seen as a metaphor for those who embrace it as a philosophy of life. It comes in various renditions: pushing the body in extreme ways and conditions until it breaks down; refusing to take past mistakes into consideration in the present; putting oneself in harm's way; taking fool-hardy risks that endanger self and others by unsafe driving; shoplifting; abusing credit and piling up debt; cheating in marriages; bending the laws in business to get ahead; fabricating research results in the hope of gaining fame and fortune; plagiarizing or outright lying and deception in a book if it promises to be a best-seller; fudging on a résumé to get a job; and pushing the limits with friends and family if the potential pay-off seems high enough.

"Go for it" may be an attractive slogan in a world where nothing short of extreme behavior gets anyone's attention and where competition invites taking chances to get ahead. But whether its trying to win a major golf tournament or trying to win in life, risk-taking needs to be tempered by careful course management.

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