

With Ochoa, golf has a giving side

Colman McCarthy | Apr. 27, 2009



Lorena Ochoa tees off on the third hole during a golf tournament in Rancho Mirage, Calif., April 3. (Reuters/Lucy Nicholson)

Oh-Oh-Ochoa. Oh-Oh-Ochoa.

If the world's golfing community isn't chanting that already about Lorena Ochoa, it should. The Mexican athlete won her 25th tournament in early March, a three-stroke win in Pattaya, Thailand. That it went a bit unsung is due to the high-volume return of the gimped Tiger Woods to the PGA tour on steady knees that genuflect to no one. Woods, who has won 11 of his last 16 tournaments, is a one-person stimulus package for a sports world miasmic with A-Rod steroid tales and the fall of Charles Barkley, the drunk locked up on a driving-under-the-influence conviction.

Ochoa, who at 5'6" and 120 pounds is closer in build to a ballet dancer than a golfer who drives it 270 yards, brings to women's athletics what Woods supplies to men's.

They have similarities. Both were prodigies winning tournaments before they were 10. Both left college after two years, Ochoa from Arizona State and Woods from Stanford. Both created education-driven foundations that operate schools for marginalized children: Ochoa in her home city of Guadalajara, Mexico, and Woods in his native Southern California. Both are known to be gracious. The golf coach at Arizona State told an interviewer, "Lorena Ochoa is good at golf. She is 10 times as good off the golf course."

Everyone who has ever encountered her loves her.

Golf scribes are now calling Lorena "Tigresa."

Mexico, a fear-gripped country right now, with uncontrolled and unblinkered drug gangs killing more than 6,000 public officials and anyone else in their way in 2008, needs a national hero to raise its spirits.

Ochoa, only 28, is ready for the role.

Her work in education -- La Barranca, her primary school in a Guadalajara barrio, has more than 250 children

enrolled -- is the beginning.

With two-thirds of Mexicans failing to finish primary school, Ochoa's work in education "is something I want to do nationwide," she told the Los Angeles Times in November. "You change the life [of] one girl, one guy, and you change the life around them with their family. It's something amazing. I play golf and my motivation is to help. The more I win, the more I can help."

She persuaded government officials to build public golf courses in Guadalajara and Mexico City. In a country of 108 million, fewer than 20,000 play golf. "I want to make sure that little kids in Mexico can play golf," Ochoa told a reporter.

It's true that building golf courses doesn't make Ochoa Mother Teresa, but it does mean jobs for those who construct and run the facilities. On the week-to-week U.S. women's tour, which she dominates, Ochoa routinely seeks out -- and buys lunch for -- the greenskeeping crews, many of whom are Hispanic. "You will never regret making a sacrifice," she has explained. "It will always pay you back. I have more than I ever thought I would."

As with the poor children of Mexico, professional golf itself could use whatever help Ochoa can muster. Corporations, whether grubbing for bailout money from the Troubled Assets Relief Program or nervous about its CEOs frolicking in celebrity pro-ams while laying off workers, are under attack for their ongoing sponsorships of tournaments. One of these is Northern Trust, a Chicago bank that finagled a \$1.6 billion federal bailout.



After the recent Northern Trust Open at the Riviera Country Club in Los Angeles, 18 Democrats on the House Financial Services Committee, including chairman Barney Frank, teed off in a letter to the company's CEO: "We insist that you immediately return to the federal government the equivalent of what Northern Trust frittered away on these lavish events."

Morgan Stanley, another of the bailed and a sponsor of the Memorial Tournament in Ohio, won't be sending its fun-loving execs to the event this year. The golf-industrial complex is even shakier now that Robert Allen Stanford and his tournament-sponsoring Stanford Financial Group have been accused by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission for "massive ongoing fraud."

None of that involves Lorena Ochoa. Taught well by nuns and priests in Catholic schools, her generosity and her bonding with children represent the other side of golf, the giving side.

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