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McIlroy and golf's cloistered world

by Colman McCarthy



Rory McIlroy on the golf course (Newscom/Jim Dedmon)

Winsome winners are the rarity in professional sports. We put up with overpaid and undercontrolled athletes who berate umpires (baseball), shove refs (basketball), curse line judges (tennis), bite ears (boxing), butt heads (soccer), hot dog in end zones (football), blood-dope (bicycling), shill for corporate America, and have oceanic egos.

Into this drossy scene comes Rory McIlroy. Small wonder the 22-year-old golfer from Northern Ireland finds himself bathed in praise, affection and gratitude after winning the U.S. Open in mid-June in Bethesda, Md. He won praise for the record-setting low score of 16 under par that none of the game's greats ever approached, and affection for his guileless affability and gratitude for keeping his sport and himself in context: Golf is only a game and he is only one of many with a talent for it. No matter how far and straight McIlroy drives a golf ball or how curving the putts he sinks, he lives, like the rest of us, in a world racked by war, famine and poverty.

Days before the Open, the young Irishman was in Haiti -- about the last place you'd expect to see a golfer prepping for a major tournament. McIlroy, who came for a two-day visit as part of his commitment to

serve as a UNICEF Ireland Ambassador, met with families still recovering from the January 2010 earthquake. He spent time with children in newly built schools, the sick in camps for the homeless, and medical staffs in birthing centers. After the quake, every inch of the greens and fairways of a golf course in Port-au-Prince had become a swarming tent city for the displaced.

‘There’s stuff there I never thought I’d see in my life,’ McIlroy said of his Haitian stay. ‘A little bit of perspective now and again is a good thing.’

In the cloistered world of bigtime golf, the enclosures are the fenced-off country clubs that earn extra cash by hosting PGA tournaments. McIlroy’s win came at Congressional Country Club, where the initiation tab tops \$100,000. The kempt and well-gated haven, founded in 1924 during the Coolidge administration by two Indiana Republican congressmen, is so overrun with lobbyists, corporate grandees and dealmakers that it ought to be named Fixers Country Club.

Want to backslap or elbow-rub a senator who heads the banking committee or the chairperson of a House tax-writing subcommittee? Invite them out for 18 holes. The matchup is perfect: Politicians freeload and lobbyists freewheel. Better yet, the golf, food and booze can be written off as business expenses. For years, members of Congress had their dues waived. The course became so clogged with the Tip O’Neills, Dan Quayles, Tom DeLays and Dan Rostenkowskies that management called a halt. Only presidents were given free golf. That, too, became disruptive.

In the early 1990s, when Bill Clinton and his entourage became regulars at Congressional, the massive security detail, in addition to hiding behind trees and under bushes, had to ward off danger by sweeping adjacent fairways of players. The latter’s complaints were strong enough to persuade Clinton to do his swinging -- the golf kind -- elsewhere. He chose the fairways of Andrews Air Force Base, one of some 230 golf courses the Pentagon operates worldwide for the warrior class.

It was at Andrews that Barack Obama and John Boehner, on the same weekend in June that Rory McIlroy was scorching Congressional, had what the media called the Golf Summit. With jobs and unemployment on their minds, it was a moment for action: by taking caddies. The pay is good: \$50 a bag at some clubs, \$100 for two. Instead, Obama and Boehner, with Joe Biden and John Kasich in the foursome, joy rode in golf carts.

The question now is whether Boehner will invite Obama to play at the Speaker’s course: the Burning Tree Club, a couple of par fives from Congressional. It will never happen. It has a male-only membership, which apparently doesn’t bother man-of-the-people Boehner but which would be disastrous for women’s-vote-conscious Obama. The only time females are allowed on the property of Burning Tree is the week before Christmas when they are allowed to buy presents at the pro shop for their husbands.

For now, let’s just sigh -- and then embrace McIlroy and hope that what touched his soul in Haiti will mean as much to him as how he touched his fans at Congressional.

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