

SLICE OF LIFE



By Terry Moore

Pardon the interruption, but I must get a few things off my chest.

Usually a nice, comforting essay about some aspect of golf is in order for

this column but spring fever and the emergence of the Michigan golf season have gotten the better of me. There have been so many incidents and media tempests surrounding the game that I must jump in and offer my two cents worth.

Ken Venturi and his book: You know the story by now. Venturi reviews his storied golf career by including a section about the '58 Masters saying in so many words that eventual winner Arnold Palmer knowingly broke a rule on the 12th hole involving an embedded ball. Reading the full text of the section (excerpted in *Golf Magazine*), Venturi makes some interesting and challenging observations about the incident. But the upshot of all of this, in the world of public opinion, is that Venturi calls "The King" a cheater and not deserving of his '58 Masters title. My two cents worth is that Venturi must've received some terrible advice and counsel from somebody on including his version of this long-forgotten incident, especially since he never brought it up before in all of his years as a CBS analyst and Masters commentator. Instead, one can imagine the book publisher (and certainly the publicist) gleefully welcoming the inclusion of the Masters incident. "Hey, this should sell more books!" This underlying moral is best summed up by paraphrasing a quote by the iconoclastic Michael Moore in a recent documentary titled *The Corporation*: The rich man will sell you the rope to hang yourself with if he thinks he can make a buck.

Johnny Miller and his commentary. Miller is the preeminent color analyst in golf. No one else is even close for making salient, bold and usually intelligent observations. I remember once talking to one of the assistant producers for NBC Golf who said Miller has such acute perceptions that he can consistently tell a player's errant shot by merely listening to the audio feed of how the ball is struck. Wow, that's as spooky as Dustin Hoffman in the movie *Rain Man*! But Miller is that sharp and that perceptive. But my two cents on Miller is that he gets too enamored with himself and his lofty reputation. Case in point was his comment last month about Craig Parry's swing, describing it so disparagingly that it would make "Ben Hogan puke." Of course, Parry got the ultimate last laugh by holing out a spectacular eagle at Doral's 18th hole in the playoff. Truth be told, Miller had a long vacation between his last '03 telecast and his first '04 one. So when he got to Doral and his 2004 debut, Miller must've felt some subconscious need to get "on the board" with his fan base and/or the *USA TODAY*'s influential sports television critic Rudy Martzke. Why even earlier during Doral telecast, Miller said something about how annoying it had been for him to watch the winter golf telecasts where announcers were constantly talking over the putts. Gee, now Miller is even into Martzke's turf! Miller is a terrific commentator but not everything that pops up in that fertile and original golf mind needs verbalization.

SI Golf Plus Tour Player Survey: *Sports Illustrated* hit a publishing ace a decade ago when it started *Golf Plus*, its golf magazine-within-a-magazine. It's an excellent section with some of the best writers and features around. For the past several years, it has conducted a PGA Tour player survey on a number of topics, most of which are purely entertaining-e.g. "Best-looking Tour wife or girlfriend?" (Elin Nordegren, Tiger's fiancé, in a runaway (bride?)); "Which TV commentator would you like to strangle?" (Johnny Miller in a land-

slide—see above.) This year while polling 72 players, it included the question of "Who is the most overrated instructor in golf?" Treetops affable and omnipresent teacher Rick Smith topped the list at 30%, followed next by David Leadbetter at 29% and then Butch Harmon at 21%. My two cents worth is that some Tour players can be insanely jealous and resentful at times of anyone's success derived from outside the ropes. (They're even more jealous of success inside the ropes!)

In many ways, Tour players prefer swing gurus, like Smith, to mirror their job edict for caddies: show up, keep up and shut up. Admittedly, Smith and other celebrated instructors are often over-exposed. But isn't that more the fault of national golf magazines, *The Golf Channel*, and network TV all who gladly collaborate with them on over-emphasizing swing techniques and analysis? And to be fair to Smith, this survey was taken before his star pupil Phil Mickelson's resurgent play and early Tour win in January. Mickelson credits Smith and Dave Pelz (who finished fourth on the nefarious list) for an off-season re-haul of his game and course management. As such, *SI Golf Plus* should have at least noted somewhere when the survey was completed. Instead, being "edgy" and having some "bite" often take editorial precedence nowadays in even the best publications. Most importantly to me, however, was how Smith handled this rare public relations setback. Although Smith admitted he was "hurt" by the player survey, he was quoted in *USA TODAY* as saying simply, "I've just got to believe in my guys and trust in their faith in me." And in a nice defense of his close friend, Mickelson added in the same article, "He's (Rick) a tremendous teacher. He doesn't teach a system. He teaches each person a swing they can execute the best." Let's see now: Phil's play this year has been steady and strong while Adam Scott, Harmon's student, wins the Players Championship. Anybody for a survey recount?

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