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David Toms

The Open Championship, held each summer in Britain, is the oldest and perhaps most prestigious title in professional golf. In 2005, the tournament was held at the birthplace of golf, the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews in Scotland. Former Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) champion David Toms, with one win and six top-10 finishes so far that season, was among a handful of players with a great chance to win. Then something unusual happened.

On the morning of the second round, Toms walked into the officials' tent and explained to the bewildered officials (and later to the press) that the day before he might or might not have done something for which he should have taken penalty strokes. On the famous 17th hole, the Road Hole, he missed a medium-length putt, then strode to the hole and tapped it in. He was unsure, however, whether the ball might have been wobbling in the wind slightly when he did so. It is against the rules of golf to hit a ball while it is still in motion, and because he was not sure, David Toms disqualified himself from the Open.

To disqualify yourself from a major tournament is an extraordinary act of sportsmanship; to do so for something that may or may not have happened, and that nobody else saw, is downright remarkable. Toms has always been known as one of the good guys on the PGA Tour. His charitable foundation works with abused, abandoned, and underprivileged children throughout the country and was heavily involved with the on-the-ground support for the victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. He's easygoing and direct, and you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone with a bad word to say about him. When I heard about his sportsmanlike act, I sensed there was something important going on in Toms's head, something key to achieving the

highest levels of performance and success. So I called him on his cell phone while he was driving through the backcountry, returning to his Louisiana home. I asked him, essentially, "What were you thinking?" Here's what he told me:

DAVID TOMS: When I got back to my hotel room that night after the first round and cleared my head a little bit, I started thinking about the 17th hole. I thought: If I hit a moving ball when I tapped in, it's a penalty. There was a lot of gray area there, whether or not it wobbled, and I didn't have anybody to call and ask. I'd already signed my scorecard, so I knew that if it was determined that it had happened, I would be disqualified.

I woke up early the next morning and went into the rules officials' tent and told the head official the story. He went and looked at it on the tape and said he really couldn't see anything. He finally said it was up to me; I could call it a foul or just move on to the second round. He was fine with me going ahead and playing.

But then he asked me, unofficially, "If you did finish first, how would you feel?" He just wanted to know my gut reaction. And I said I felt like I would be getting away with something, and I would feel like that for a long time, regardless of how I do. If I won the golf tournament, if I made the cut, or whatever, it still wouldn't be fair to the rest of the field and it certainly wouldn't be fair to me because I would have to live with it forever.

You just couldn't continue the tournament?

DAVID: No.

Why not?

DAVID: Because I plan on playing golf for a long time. It's not like it would just go away. What would the decision be the next time that there was a controversy like that? I wouldn't have felt right, especially if I was the one to lift the claret jug [the winners' trophy], and then all of a sudden, you know, it hit me.

That's not the way golf is; that's not the way I am. The organizers of the event, you know, they hated to see it happen, but I was really the only one that could make the call; so...

You made the call on yourself?

DAVID: I did. You know, there are things that only the golfer sees. Whether it was a breach of a rule or not, there was a doubt there that I just didn't want to live with. I decided to disqualify myself and flew home. I felt like I did the right thing.

Is there something about your feelings here that you think would affect your ability to play golf?

DAVID: Sure. My actions there were going to affect me and affect the rest of the players playing in that golf tournament, just like in anybody's line of work, whether it's sports or business or whatever.

I understand, but those are your competitors. Your job is to beat them.

DAVID: (Laughing) In golf, we just call these [infractions] on ourselves; we don't try to hold or try to foul until the refs call it on us, like in basketball. That's not what our game is about. I'm not saying that there's not sportsmanship in other sports, but it's on a different level in golf. That's just the way I was brought up. That's just the way I was brought up. That's the way golf teaches you to be.

When I got home, there was a lot of media attention, but after it was over, I felt fine. It's kind of like confessing your sins, you know. You just feel better after it's all said and done.

Is there something about the clarity you feel that you think impacts your game? Or perhaps the better

way to ask the question is the opposite: Is there something about that conflicted feeling that you think would impact your game?

DAVID: It's very hard to perform without a clear head or a clear conscience. You have to be mentally and physically ready and prepared to play.

Why?

DAVID: I think it's the power of the mind. You just can't narrow-focus when you have a lot of other stuff cluttering your mind. I know that carries over to a lot of other things, but it's certainly very important in our sport. It's all about being able to focus, having a clear mind no matter what the situation is. I think the bounce-back statistic—being able to make a birdie after you make a bogey and being able to bounce back—is one of the most important ones. It shows really the heart and mind of the player.

Somebody once told me that golf is the most difficult sport mentally, because in every sport you react to the ball — you swing at the pitch, catch the pass, and so on — but that golf ball will sit on the grass until Hell freezes over or until you hit it.

DAVID: (Laughing) Yep.

And it seems to me that the brilliance of golf, and why it's so revealing of character, is that how you bring yourself to the ball is almost more important than what you do when you get there.

DAVID: Yeah, sure, it is. It's what goes through your head on that journey. Bob Rotella, the sports psychiatrist, reminds me of this every time I've ever talked to him. He says, "We know you can talk yourself into a bad shot, so why can't you talk yourself into a good shot?"

I don't know what the secret is, but I know that the really successful people, whether it's on or off the golf course, wherever it may be, have something special there, an inner peace. You can learn skills and be trained and everything; but there's something else inside that separates the good, the

really good, and the great from the just mediocre. If we could bottle that, we'd make a lot of money (laughing).

How does integrity figure into that equation?

DAVID: It goes back to knowing you are doing the right thing and feeling good inside about your works. I've always gotten a lot of pleasure out of helping other people and trying to give them the same type of chance that I had. It's important for me to feel like I am giving back to society, whether it's through my integrity and the example that I set, or through giving, or whatever. I can't speak for everybody, but for me, knowing that you are leaving a mark adds a little spring to your step.

So to hark back to St. Andrews, did you walk away with a spring in your step?

DAVID: I walked away feeling that I did the right thing, and to be able to say, "I did the right thing" means a lot the next time that I tee up the ball. It means my head will be clear of that distraction. It also means a lot to me to set the right example. If there is a young boy playing at his club, and he has always had the problem of keeping his score correctly but didn't think much of it, I want him saying, "Look what Toms did. Maybe I need to stop trying to get away with something."

I think you are a rare individual, David. Golf is an individual sport; it's you against the world. Yet you express yourself as being constantly connected with everybody else on the tour, your community, your fans, and the people who might look up to you. Do you carry that responsibility within you in everything you do?

DAVID: People are watching. How you act, what you say, even how you say it, is not always interpreted in the right way. It's not that you don't want to speak your mind and express your opinion; but at the same time, it's being measured by what it's going to look like and how it's going to affect others. What you want others to think of you plays a big part in what you do on and off the golf course. If you live to try to set a certain example,

you have to live by that all the time. You have to live in a way that others can be proud of.

The pressure is always there to perform and to be a certain way, and we fail every day. You always come up short of your expectations. Even in a round of 61, you kind of look back and say, "Well, why didn't I shoot 59?" But it ends up becoming ingrained in you. "Hey, this is the way I live my life. This is what I need to be like 24/7. I need to do right by my family and friends and by the people that support me."

If your real personality is one thing and your on-the-golf-course, on-camera personality is something totally different, then you'd always be looking over your shoulder. For me, it's the same, so it's really not that hard.

People like David Toms, people who operate day in and day out at the top of their games, who win major championships, who are consistently ranked in the top 10 of their chosen occupation, and who sit at the top of the money list every year, know how to keep their mind in the game.

What guided David Toms? First he realized that rules and rule keepers are just a floor of what he does, not the ceiling. The officials at the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, the same officials who established and have governed the rules of golf for hundreds of years, would have allowed Toms to continue in the tournament if he had so wanted; according to the rules, he had done nothing wrong. But, prompted by a wise official who undoubtedly understood, too, that rules have limits, Toms knew that he should not. He knows the rules, the *cans* and *cants*, and plays within them when they apply. But he lives in *shoulds*. His values—honesty, obligation to others, leadership and integrity—transcend the rules. Rules can't touch the spirit of golf, his love of the game, or the purity of his pursuit of excellence. These values keep him focused on higher goals.

It also strikes me that, as individual a sport as golf is, Toms does not separate his personal success from the larger world in which he exists. He sees



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himself connected and responsible not just to himself and his self-interest, but to his family, his fans, his fellow competitors, and even to the young person just learning the sport who might be struggling with the easy temptation to cut a few corners and ignore a few putts.

He knows that, in a transparent world, everything you do is on the record and stays with you throughout your career. Toms seems to understand innately that his public and private behavior are inseparable, and that to live any other way is to set up the conditions for dissonance to thrive. That internal calm he believes so essential to the constitution of winners is nothing less than consonance, the ability to act in harmony with

oneself. Dissonance creates internal tensions that others can sense and, like the free flow of information in a transparent society, those tensions cannot be fully masked or controlled. He stands as a living example that external congruence flows from internal consonance.

Altogether, David Toms seems to crave something more than success, something more than just winning tournaments. He strives each day to fill the synapses between him and all the others in his personal stadium with trust, integrity and consonance in order to be *significant* in the eyes of those who watch and are influenced by his actions, and it is this pursuit of significance that guides his journey through life. ■
