

## An Improper Send-Off

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By Thomas Boswell

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Golf is the game of sportsmanship and proper manners, the sport that exemplifies respect for others. We even use it to teach values to kids, to instill the idea that conscience defines character.

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So this is a week for golf -- at least the crass, ungrateful, traveling-circus PGA Tour version -- to hang its head in shame.

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It's no accident that all of the world's four major championships are run by organizations other than the PGA Tour. The tour keeps pumping its own Players Championship to join the elite. But it'll never happen -- not as long as the tour humiliates itself, shows its true colors and drives itself down the scale of social respectability with disasters such as the one it is perpetrating in Washington this week.

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Even a golf tournament deserves a decent burial. The funeral for the summer pro golf stop in Washington is being held at TPC Avenel this week. The PGA Tour didn't even have the decency to close the casket.

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Washington has supported the PGA Tour since 1980, always with huge crowds that were far bigger than the usually mediocre fields merited. Local volunteers gave millions of dollars worth of free time, just as they do at every tour stop around the country. Without the goodwill of this free workforce, the tour would not have a viable economic model. And exclusive Congressional Country Club has hosted the event eight times, including last year, effectively closing its famous course to its own members for a month.

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For this, what does the public get from the PGA Tour?

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Sergio Garcia, the defending champion of the Booz Allen Classic, did not come back to Avenel yesterday even though his picture is the only one on the cover of the tournament program. The first rule of decent behavior (and marketing) in pro golf is that the defender comes back, even if he has to play nine holes from a litter before withdrawing. If you take the big check one year, you show up the next. You don't claim the classic dubious excuse -- a bad back -- when you played in the U.S. Open the previous week. Of course, Sergio's back will be healed when the U.S. Open returns to Congressional in 2011.

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But Garcia's absence is the rule this week, not the exception. Nobody's showing up for the Booz. The '04 champion, Adam Scott, also withdrew. Even modest drawing cards such as Chris DiMarco, Aaron Baddeley and Geoff Ogilvy pulled out, even though their names had been used to advertise the tournament.

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However, as a final kiss-off -- just in case anybody didn't get the message -- even the commissioner of golf swore off the Booz this week. On Wednesday, Tim Finchem didn't show up at Avenel, instead doing a news conference via telephone. Finchem cited bad weather in Columbus, Ohio. What's the matter, Tim? Didn't they have flights from Columbus to Washington yesterday morning?

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Finchem doesn't want to face the music here. He just wants to take our money -- more than a quarter of a century of it -- and run to Memphis, where FedEx's \$40 million to sponsor the year-end series led to its annual tour stop moving to the week before the U.S. Open, the slot so coveted by the Booz.

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Luckily, most in golf are several cuts above the tour's decision makers. And some of them are here. Don't hate the players. Ireland's Padraig Harrington had his heart broken at the U.S. Open, finishing bogey-bogey-bogey when three pars would have won him the title.

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"I don't think I've ever been as tired, as deflated from an event ever in my life. . . . Yes, I definitely did consider pulling out," said Harrington. "I feel gutted."

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So, why are you here in the 94-degree heat? Just honoring your word?

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"I would think that's it. I think it would be the whole of it, yes," Harrington said. "I definitely would like nothing better than to be on a plane home, just chilling out."

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But he's ranked 23rd in the world, he made a promise and he has class. So he's here.

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Others here know a raw deal when they see it. And the deal for Washington has been rare since the beginning. Before this TPC was built, former commissioner Deane Beman, a Washingtonian, said the land for the Avenel course was "the finest parcel left on the East Coast." Co-designer Ed Sneed drove around the land before a shovel of dirt was moved, dreaming of a course that, while not the equal of Congressional, might not blush at comparisons.

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Then Avenel opened.

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"What happened to the 10,000 trees?" past champion Tom Kite asked. The PGA Tour cut them down and went with a "Scottish look." Which was cheaper and pleased the adjacent real estate developers, too. After building the course the fastest possible way, the tour then opened it the same way. So what if the greens were bumpy and the conditioning immature? The cash register was ringing.

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Unfortunately, dozens of pros were alienated, never came back and spread the word that D.C. got stuck with a dog track.

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At least, over the years, the tour was consistent: It always went for cash over quality. Avenel's day fees for the public were, and are, exorbitant. As for improving its quagmire dirt parking lots, the tour never found the time or money. Course conditioning, improving Avenel's reputation among finicky players, was never a priority for 20 years.

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"The tour has made the mistake of opening [its] TPCs too early many times," Kite said. "We played Memphis too early. We played this one too early. That's probably nothing more than mismanagement -- just not taking the time to pay attention to the golf courses. . . . They've kind of jumped in, tried to make money.

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"Unfortunately, that leaves us with some bad names and reputations for the TPCs."

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The pro golf schedule is a tight squeeze. Sometimes there aren't enough suitable weeks in the right areas of the country at the proper times to accommodate every city that would and could host a pro golf event. Charlotte had the Kemper Open before Washington took it away. A case can be made -- not a good one, but at least a rationalization -- that the tour had a tough call to make among cities, sponsors and dates and that, through no one's fault, Washington just held the short straw.

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So this area got thrown over for that floozy in Memphis, the home town of FedEx, which put up \$40 million to sponsor some four-event, end-of-season tour gimmick. When Finchem decided to cut and run and boot Washington off the summer schedule, Booz Allen officials were given two hours' notice. Of course, if somebody wants to sponsor a rag-end tail-enders tour event in Washington in the fall, Finchem would love to meet the saps anytime anywhere.

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Every piece of history leaves a taste. The PGA Tour wasn't going to make this a feel-good farewell week no matter what it did. Everybody's been raw about this for months. But at the least the tour could have said goodbye properly: deliver a decent field as thanks for 26 years of support and make sure the commissioner shows up to field the brickbats.

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In the end, the golf circus could have set up its tents here one last time with a little class. That is, if it had any.

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