

'Inside the Ropes' (at the US Open).....

7/2007

By Carr McCalla, LGA Executive Director

Tuesday, 6/12/07 As Yogi would say, "It's deja vu all over again." I got to the airport in Baton Rouge at 6 AM for a 7:05 flight to Pittsburgh through Cincinnati only to find out that there were some mechanical issues with the aircraft. Same thing happened last year....maybe I need to rearrange my flight plans in the future to stay away from a Baton Rouge departure. We finally got off the ground around 8:15 but I missed my connection in Cincy....fortunately there was another flight out at 1:15 so I got to Pittsburgh at 2:25, only a couple of hours later than planned. I'm going to see the Pirates play tonight with my stepson and Henri Wolbrette, a member of our Board of Directors who's also working at the Open. We're staying downtown so we'll hopefully get to the hotel without too much trouble and then it's only a short walk to the ballpark.

Got to the hotel around 3:30. The USGA has all the rules officials staying at the William Penn Hotel in downtown Pittsburgh. It's a beautiful old hotel that wears its age well. There is no 13th floor, which I've seen before, but there's also no 5th floor. Don't know the significance of that but I'll try to find out why before I leave.

Ballgame was great. PNC Park is right on the waterfront with home plate looking out over the Allegheny River to the Pittsburgh skyline. The Pirates turned four double plays in the first five innings, and ended up beating the Texas Rangers 7-5. I was ready for bed when we got back to the hotel. I set my alarm for 5:30 so I can get to Oakmont early and walk the course in the morning before our Rules meeting.

Wednesday, 6/13/07 I caught the bus to the course around 6:45 and it took almost 45 minutes to get there. There's no easy route to Oakmont so we'll have to leave even earlier than normal to be sure we get there in plenty of time. The golf course is absolutely gorgeous. #1 is a downhill par 4 just off the back of the clubhouse. You cross over the Pennsylvania Turnpike to the second tee and holes 2-8 are on that side of the Turnpike. The famous (or infamous, depending on your perspective) church pews bunker runs down the left of holes three and four. The par three eighth has been lengthened to 288 yards from the back tee. They plan on playing it all the way back two days and on the "forward" (252 yards) tee the other days. We watched Luke Donald and Sergio Garcia hit from the 288 yard tee today. Donald hit three wood hole high and Garcia hit three wood 10 yards or so short. Should be an interesting hole during the Championship.

There was a lot of discussion today about all the trees that had been removed during the last few years. Mark Studer, one of our rules officials, is a 28 year member at Oakmont and was chairman of the green committee when the decision was made to move forward with the tree removal project. They apparently began the project in the dead of night but once it became apparent that the golf course would make a welcome return to its original design and that the sky would not fall they came out from under cover to complete the project. I've never been here before but those that were here for the Open in 1994 say that it looks completely different now. From watching the '94 Open I do remember the stand of trees just left of the 17th green, and they're all gone now.

Our Rules meeting was held a block from the hotel at the Duquesne Club, a beautiful downtown business club that reminded me of the business club from the movie *Trading Places* with Eddie Murphy, Dan Akroyd, and Don Ameche. We got our rules assignments at the meeting; I'm in the last group off #1 tomorrow morning with Michael Berg, Kyle Dobbs, and amateur Jason Kokrak. On Friday I go at 1:58 PM off #10 with Retief Goosen, Luke Donald, and Angel Cabrera.

Thursday, 6/14/07 I caught the shuttle to the course at 7 AM....it again took almost 45 minutes to go the 12 miles to Oakmont. I always have nightmares about getting caught in traffic and not being able to make my starting time....as a consequence, I always give myself plenty of time to get to the course. Once I arrived, I had breakfast then went to the rules office to pick up my radio. I then reviewed some of the rules issues that we had discussed at the rules meeting last night. We're again using ball drops for temporary immovable obstructions (TIOs) such as concession stands, leader boards, etc. If a ball comes to rest where there is interference from a TIO (other than when the ball is completely behind the TIO) the USGA is requiring that relief must be taken by going to a ball drop in front of the TIO. While it sounds a bit complicated, it significantly simplifies the relief procedure.

My group today includes an amateur from Warren, Ohio, Jason Kokrak. He's a tall, lanky kid who hits it out of sight. It's his first Open and I asked him if he was nervous before he hit his tee shot off #1 and he said, "I'm terrified." After hitting that tee shot dead right into the trees that guard the boundary fence, he proceeded to make a 'good' bogey on #1 and then played pretty well the rest of the day. My other two players were Michael Berg and Kyle Dobbs. Kokrak, being from nearby, had a pretty good contingent of townspeople following him and it was fun hearing the encouragement that they shouted his way. The golf course is extremely difficult, and even with the ½ inch of rain we got last night, it was still pretty firm. The greens were quick, although probably not as quick as they'll be this weekend, providing we get no more rain. We were in danger of falling out of position early on in the round. The USGA has encouraged us to tell our groups if we are close to falling out of position, so I mentioned that we were in danger of that after our third hole. Fortunately, the group in front of us waited on the 4th hole (a par five) to go for the green in two and that gave us a chance to catch up a bit. By the time we reached #13, however, we were out of position. I called our rover, Slugger White from the PGA Tour, and indicated that we were, in fact, out of position. Slugger said that we would hit a roadblock a couple of holes ahead so he would not put us 'on the clock' at that point. On the 14th hole, a 358 yard par four, most of the players are hitting irons off the tee. My amateur, Kokrak, took out his driver and threaded the needle, hitting it about 20 yards from the green. The fairway where his ball ended up was about 15 yards wide (his ball actually ended up in the first cut of rough) with deep, deep bunkers on either side. He seems to have no conscience off the tee even though he's been spraying the ball, mostly losing it right. By the time we reached the 16th tee we still had not gotten back in position, and Slugger began timing us. Dobbs made a great up and down par from the front bunker, but recorded a bad time on his putt, which Slugger informed him of on the way to the 17th tee. It never ceases to amaze me why players don't play faster when they are told they're out of position. Once a group is actually put 'on the clock' their routine changes noticeably. We were back in position by the time we reached the 18th tee and actually had to wait to tee off as well as to hit second shots into #18. The seventeenth hole is a short par four and my group all hit irons off the tee. Kokrak hit a great approach shot that actually lipped out for eagle and ended up about six inches away. The crowd went wild, we actually thought he had holed out (you couldn't see the hole from down

below in the fairway). I had the only ruling of the day on the green here. Berg was last to putt and after he began to replace his ball prior to putting he called me over. His ball would not stay at rest when he tried to replace it. There was a small indentation in the green just in front of the ball and the ball would roll forward every time he attempted to replace it in front of his mark. After trying another couple of times it became apparent that it would not stay at rest so I simply had him move it enough to the side of the mark to get it to remain at rest, he putted, and we headed to the 18th tee. We finally finished 5 hours and 20 minutes after we hit our first tee shots. Kokrak had a 76, Dodds a 77, and Berg an 81.

After a quick bite to eat, I actually caught a nice nap on the veranda overlooking the 9th green, the back portion of which also serves as the practice putting green. The weather today was great, a bit overcast but not too hot. Forecast for the rest of the week is good as well, with highs in the high 70s and low 80s, and not much chance of rain. After a preliminary trip to the merchandise tent (a pretty good hike from the clubhouse as it's over behind the second green) to check out what's there (I'll make my obligatory purchases tomorrow) I had dinner with my rules official buddies in the clubhouse then headed back to the hotel to rest my aching feet.

I have two time Open Champion Retief Goosen, Luke Donald, and Angel Cabrera from Argentina tomorrow afternoon. Cabrera is one of only two players to break par today, shooting a one-under 69, so it should be a fun day with those guys tomorrow.

Friday, 6/15/07 I caught the shuttle about 8:30 and got to the course about an hour later. My stepson, who lives in Pittsburgh, and his girlfriend are coming out today. I met them at 10 AM and we headed to the merchandise tent where we made our purchases. By then it was around Noon so I headed back to the clubhouse to prepare for my afternoon 'walk' and they headed out to watch the action. She's excited to see Tiger play and I encouraged them to pick a spot out ahead of him so they'd have a chance to see him up close on at least one hole. His gallery is so huge that you could follow him all day and never really get close.

I had a quick bite to eat and picked up my radio before taking some time to review the TIO procedures. The grandstands, for the most part, are a pretty good distance from play and the rough is severe enough that even if a player misses the fairway and/or green chances are he won't get close enough to the grandstands to have TIO interference. Having said that, I want to be sure I'm clear on how to proceed if my guys do get into a situation where they need relief from a TIO.

I've had Goosen before and he is a man of few words. Cabrera shot 69 yesterday and is alone in second place starting today's play. We started on #10 and got off to a rather inauspicious start, Goosen and Cabrera making bogeys with Donald hitting a gorgeous drive and making the only par of the group. Cabrera made another bogey on the long par five 12th (667 yards) and I wondered if Oakmont was going to win the battle with Cabrera today.....but he immediately made birdie on the par three 13th and also birdied the other par three on the back, #16, to get back to even for the day. He's a very impressive player, hits it a long way but also has a really deft short game. The tees were up on the short par four 17th and both Cabrera and Goosen hit woods to try to drive the green. Goosen hit driver into the deep rough left of the green while Cabrera hit a rescue club just in front of the green but also in the rough. They both made par but not easy ones. The USGA tempts you to take a go at the green here but if you aren't successful it's a real challenge to make your par. In

watching the leader boards around the course, it was apparent that Cabrera was hanging around the lead. Our crowd was growing as were the TV crew members. At one point I counted 21 people inside the ropes with us, most of which were TV people.

Goosen was really struggling. He appeared to want to play a draw but continued to hit the ball straight most of the day, spending a good bit of time in the right rough as a consequence. Donald played pretty solid, but was consistently 40 yards behind Cabrera off the tee.

As we turned to the front side, Cabrera continued to play well until we hit #4 and #5, the church pew holes. He made three consecutive fives on numbers four through six, two bogeys and a par. On the par five fifth hole I had my only involvement in the day's play. Cabrera hit it way right off the tee and when we got to his ball it was lying on the red line identifying one of the lateral water hazards that run down the side of holes #5 and #6. These hazards are unique in that none of them contain water. They are dry hazards that are grown up with long fescue grass. You can play out of most of them but as you can imagine, you have some challenging stances and in many cases you're lucky to get the ball out at all. Cabrera wanted me to verify that his ball was indeed in the hazard, which it was, and I did. It was close to where the hazard changes from a lateral hazard (red lines) to a regular hazard (yellow lines) so there were two stakes to identify the changeover location. He asked if he could remove the stakes prior to his shot. Stakes such as these are movable obstructions and as such, I replied that they could be removed and I simply pulled them out of the ground. He proceeded to hit a great pitch shot into the fairway, a long third shot into the green, then two putts for a routine par. A short missed putt on #6 led to another bogey to take him to two-over for the day and one-over for the Championship. The eighth hole played as a 288 yard par three today. Donald hit a huge three wood that found it's way to the green, Goosen hit two iron into the left rough short of the green and Cabrera hit a rescue club just short of the putting surface, then hit a Texas wedge (putter) within kick-in range for his par. After crossing the Pennsylvania Turnpike to the ninth tee, Cabrera absolutely killed a drive, leaving him about 135 yards on this 477 yard par four. A sand wedge approach to about a foot, gave him a finishing birdie to shoot one-over 71 for the day and alone in the lead through 36 holes at even par 140. His birdie brought the cut to 10-over 150. The cut at the Open is the low 60 and ties and anyone within 10 shots of the lead so his birdie made all the guys at 11-over 151 very unhappy. Unfortunately, one of those at 151 was Luke Donald and Cabrera was somewhat apologetic to Donald in the scoring tent. It also broke Phil Mickelson's long string of made cuts in majors as he was also at 151.

A quick dinner and back to the hotel by about 10 PM.

Saturday, 6/16/07 I am with the 1:15 PM pairing today....Stuart Appleby and last year's champion, Geoff Ogilvy. We have more officials than we need today so I will serve as an observer with my group. That means that I'll walk basically one shot ahead and inform our referee of any issues that may come up with our pairing. In other words, I'll be in the landing zone when players hit their tee shots, then on the green when they hit second/approach shots. It's really an enjoyable chore as I'm able to watch many shots of the group ahead of ours and my group as well. We had a relatively uneventful day. Ogilvy struggled to a 78, but Appleby played well, rolling in a 35 footer on the 18th green for birdie and a one-over 71 on the day. That vaulted him into a tie for 10th place only 5 shots off the lead heading into final round play. There were only six scores better than his today. Tiger Woods shot the day's second best score, a 69, hitting 17 of 18 greens. An

unbelievable ball-striking round considering these narrow fairways that are firming up by the hour. If he hits it like that tomorrow he'll be tough to beat. He's in the last group and will start the day two shots behind Adam Baddeley, who he'll be paired with. It should make for a wonderful finish, with no fewer than 16 players within six shots of the lead.

Oakmont is truly a wonderful venue. The next few years the Open sites are a real who's who of great old courses. Torrey Pines in 2008, Bethpage Black in 2009, Pebble Beach (my favorite) in 2010, Congressional in 2011, Olympic in 2012, Merion in 2013, and the USGA just announced a return to Pinehurst in 2014.

I leave tomorrow for home so I'll be in the air as the leaders finish. I'm sure I'll catch the highlights when I get back to Lafayette. It should be a classic finish to a wonderful Championship.

A quick postscript.....you know by now that Angel Cabrera shot 69 on Sunday to win the Championship by a stroke over Woods and Furyk. A great finish to a great Championship. The USGA did a wonderful job of course set-up. Even though the winning score was five-over par it was a difficult, fair venue that tested not only a player's golfing skills but his mental toughness and perseverance as well.

See you next month.....

.....Inside the Ropes