



A Barometer of Our Character

How we act when no one is watching

BY BRAD YARBROUGH

We hear a lot of commentary today about our collapsing culture and the erosion of its foundational, long-held values. If you agree with the observation, you'll also concur that the culprit is the collapse of individual character.

Success at All Costs

The wide world of sports has a featured role in our society—providing an insightful view of our definition of and regard for rules, values, character and ethics. Breaking the rules often points to a character failure. In some cases, an athlete may not know the rules or inadvertently violates them. Yet, all too often it is simply a willful act of an athlete that knows better.

An online search will yield a long list of cheaters, crooks and criminals that made sports history. Pete Rose, holder of numerous Major League Baseball records, was banned from baseball in 1989 for placing bets on pro baseball outcomes. In more recent years, the world was shocked when stories emerged about world-renowned cyclist Lance Armstrong, who used performance-enhancing drugs to achieve success. This was also the case with numerous baseball pros, including Barry Bonds, Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa. In 1994, Tonya Harding orchestrated the “knee whack” on skating competitor Nancy Kerrigan.

True Sportsmanship

Every sport has its illustrations of ethics failures. Fortunately, there are also some bright shining examples of

good character and great ethics. The game of golf is a showcase for good and bad behavior. Perhaps no other sport places such emphasis on etiquette, rule-keeping and sportsmanship. On the course, a player's actions are usually under scrutiny by others. Yet, it can be during one of those “no-one-is-looking” moments that true character is revealed.

Take a look back at one one of the greatest golfers in history, Bobby Jones. He was playing in the 1925 U.S. Open when he self-reported an infraction and took the one-stroke penalty. During play, as he addressed the ball lying in the rough, it moved ever so slightly. No referee or official saw it move, so they insisted that he should not take the penalty. But he knew he had inadvertently done it, and he applied the rule. With that added stroke, the game ended in a tie. In the end, he lost a 36-hole playoff. That one stroke cost him the outright victory! Afterward, a sportswriter tried to praise Jones for his integrity. Jones reacted by saying, “You might as well praise me for not robbing banks.”

Albert Einstein once said, “Relativity applies to physics, not ethics.” Though it is tempting to make decisions based on the cost or reward to one's reputation or bank account, such situational ethics should be carefully considered. Bobby Jones, who remained an amateur throughout his career because he feared playing for money might corrupt his love of the game, made another oft quoted statement. He said, “Many shots are spoiled at the last instant by efforts to add a few more yards.” Greed and

ambition will damage your ultimate success. Jones knew this to be true by saying, “When you cheat in golf, the only person you're cheating is yourself.”

The Power of Good Habits

Success in today's world relies on good character, integrity and ethics. It requires that we learn from past mistakes and know the difference between what's right and wrong. It's not about personal gain. It means staying true to our values in everything we do.

Individuals must make doing the right thing a habit, and through the process of maturity, become an individual of good character—not merely a character that does a lot of good. As Stephen Covey writes in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, “Our character is a collection of our habits.” Character is everything, and it's especially obvious when no one is watching. ★



Brad Yarbrough is the Owner and CEO of Pilgrim Land Services, a right of way services company in Oklahoma City. With over 35 years experience in oil and gas, he has clients nationwide and an extensive network of landmen and agents.