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Superstitions

Numbered balls, coins all part of mind games

By Doug Funke
staff writer

The golfer pulled a beat-up ball out of his pocket as he always did when he approached the tee of a water hole that invariably gave him trouble.

Suddenly, a voice boomed from the heavens, "Use a new ball."

Startled, the golfer looked around but couldn't see anyone. But he did as the voice commanded.

"Now, tee it up," the voice ordered. The golfer complied. "Take a practice swing," the voice thundered. He did. "Use the old ball," the voice boomed.

Golf routines — superstitions if the behavior of someone else is under scrutiny — start innocuously enough. They're spawned by the repetitive, individual nature of the game.

Success breeds imitation. Sometimes, though, behaviors transcend logic and routines take on a life of their own.

Al Mengert, club pro at Oakland Hills, which this week hosts the 85th U.S. Open Championship of the United States Golf Association, says he hates to play with anything except a ball identified by the numeral one. Now, Big Al knows markings on balls have absolutely no bearing on distance and accuracy.

YET, HE stays with the number one. "It's kind of like being first in a tournament," he said. Mengert acknowledges that he gets annoyed when he has to sift through more than a handful of packages for a specific numbered ball for a club member.

Dave Lancer, a media official for the PGA Tour, admits to a quirk of his own.

"I use dimes to mark my ball on the green," he said. "Don't ask me why. I started when I was a kid. I always have three. It hasn't brought me any luck, but I refuse to leave without 'em."

Gary Whitener, golf pro at Livonia's Whispering Willows and secretary of the Professional Golf Association of Michigan,

has seen all kinds during his years as a club pro.

"There definitely is a routine and you can see people do it from the time they have their coffee, get practice in, head to the john — so to speak — to get everything together, go to the putting green, then they're ready," Whitener said.

Mengert speaks again.

"MY DAUGHTER had a friend who had to have three pennies in her back pocket for good luck," he said. "Maybe some day, she had a good round, reached into the pocket for some change for a Coke and found three pennies."

Gestures originally adopted subconsciously as routine may be discarded, then consciously pulled out of the hat at crucial moments to gain a competitive edge.

Mengert said he once played against an opponent in the U.S. Amateur who snapped his fingers once before he hit every putt and twice before every other shot.

"I think he did it as a distraction," Mengert said.

"It's funny how you associate (Arnold) Palmer with the hitching of his pants," Whitener recalled. "That may have been done to excite the crowd."

So why does one person always take three waggles and two practice swings before finally hitting the ball, while another takes one waggle and three practice swings?

Because at one time — probably long ago — that's what happened just before the launching of an excellent shot. Why tamper with success — until things go bad.

Routine isn't always comforting.

"A lot of people with superstitions are too superstitious to tell you," Mengert said. "In some ways, admitting superstitions is admitting a weakness."

"The game is so mental, any psychological lift is worth its weight in gold," Whitener suggested.

Maybe while you're out watching the pros this week, you can look for that one superstitious quirk. But don't tell anyone.

Profile: Lanny Wadkins

Lanny Wadkins' approach to the game of golf is quite simple, really. He attacks the course constantly.

"I get a big kick out of playing that way," he says. "You know, going for the green in two on a par five when the second shot is over water, but I never take a chance if it's a bad risk."

While others must look for the safe way home, Wadkins can be bold because he has the shots, possibly more shots than anyone in the game. With a grin, he says, "Some people don't know I have those shots. They see me lashing away but don't understand what I'm doing. I'm always working the ball. Every shot is calculated."

"That's when you win," he adds. And win he has over the years. When he is on his game — which is most of the time in recent years — there isn't a more feared competitor on the tour. That's why he has been able to win some big ones on the most demanding courses.

He won the 1977 PGA Championship in a playoff over Gene Littler at Pebble

Beach, and later that summer, won the World Series of Golf on the tough Firestone South course.

TWO YEARS LATER, when weather conditions bordered on the unplayable, with wind gusts up to 45 mph, he won the Tournament Players Championship at Sawgrass with a five-under par total of 283 — five better than runner-up Tom Watson.

He won three times in 1982 and came back with two more in 1983, winning the MONY-Tournament of Champions for a second straight year.

In addition, he was superb for the third straight time in the Ryder Cup matches against the European team.

Wadkins enjoyed a brilliant amateur career, highlighted by his victory in the 1970 U.S. Amateur. It wasn't any surprise when he became an immediate success on the PGA tour. After earning his player's card in the fall of 1971, he won the 1972 Sahara Invitational.