

Introduction

I had just played the best round of golf in my life.

The round came on the last day of the crucible of PGA Tour Qualifying School, or Q School as it is often called. According to John Feinstein, “The chances of getting from first stage to second stage to the finals and the PGA Tour are pretty close to 100-to-1....In fact, most of the players who enter Q School will never make it to the tour. Only about one-third of them will ever make it to the finals, and about half will never make it out of the first stage.”¹

I spent two years preparing for this, my first Q School. The top 15 would advance to the finals for the privilege of playing on the PGA Tour. After three days of play, I started the final day in 33rd place out of the 144 golfers. Teeing off, I felt the pressure and

knew it would take something special for me to advance.

The events of that round were almost magical, but I didn't begin to realize that until I got to the fifth hole, the toughest hole on the course. After a great drive, I hit a one iron from 220 yards to 15 feet and drained the putt to go to 2 under par. "Game on," I thought. I went on to hit every fairway and 17 of 18 greens shooting what would become the low round of the day. Now I had to wait while the 32 golfers with lower scores who teed off after me finished their rounds.

I had a mixture of emotions in those 90 minutes. On one hand, I felt great excitement for the performance I managed in light of the challenge before me as I teed off that morning. I played other sports. I had been in other tense situations that included some anxiety but nothing like the nerves I faced at Q School. It was exciting to play well amid such pressure.

As each player finished and their total was posted, my position kept rising—31, 30...25, 24... 20, 19—and I was afraid. Afraid to hope. Afraid that if I hoped too deeply and wanted it too much, it would be yanked away from me. In the fear, I resisted the encouragement

from fellow players about my round and their hopes it would be low enough to qualify.

As my position continued to rise, I worked harder to downplay it all and keep at bay the hope that was trying to rise in my heart.

That wasn't all. My fear and self-protection went so far in those 90 minutes that I didn't practice putt, or hit any balls in possible preparation for a potential playoff. I didn't even touch my golf clubs, thinking that if I did so, my hope—no matter how small—would “jinx” my chances and bring on what I feared.

As the final group finished and the results were posted on the scoreboard, I stood there in amazement. My round moved me from 33rd to a tie for 14th with five other players, dictating a playoff among the five of us for the final two spots, 14th and 15th.

It started to drizzle as the five of us headed to the first tee. The rain increased as we stood getting ready to tee off, so much so that I almost asked the official to delay the start. I didn't, nor did any of the other players, probably because we were all trying to keep a grip on our steadily growing nerves. Rather than focusing on the golf ahead of me, I was just trying to calm my heart rate and breathe so I didn't faint!

The playoff began. I bogeyed the first hole and was out. Just like that. After two years of preparation, four days of golf, four hours to play the final round, two hours of waiting—it was over.

The other four players headed to the next tee. I went in a much different direction as I trekked back to the clubhouse alone, what little hope I had now vanished. I tried to console myself and overcome my disappointment by thinking about the excitement of the good play that day that got me there. It wasn't helping.

Needing Perspective

I called my wife, Beth. While not at the qualifying site physically, she had been on the journey every step of the way. She heard about the first round bad weather and my good round that put me in good shape at 11th place after the first day. She empathized with my struggles during the second round when I got so physically sick that I considered withdrawing. She offered support as I bemoaned the unlikely chance of advancing because of the back nine that day which landed me in 65th place after day two. She encouraged me after better play in the third

round that moved me up to 33rd after day three.

As I called her, I was aware of the 292 shots I had taken during the qualifying. I was aware of the reality that if my play had changed any one of those 292 shots up or down one shot, I wouldn't have been in the playoff. I would have either qualified in the 14th spot with those other 4 playing off for the 15th spot or I would be out of the playoff. If I hadn't gotten sick on day two, I would have advanced. Easily.

I was even more aware of the numerous ways in that last round that my score could have been lower. I left an uphill 8-foot putt for birdie on the 8th hole dead in short just on the lip. More frustrating, I left a 12-foot downhill putt for birdie on the 11th hole hanging on the lip in what seemed like an impossible resistance to gravity. I had a 10-foot birdie putt on 13 lip out and come back toward me and a 90-degree lip out on a 5-foot birdie putt on 15. If one of those putts had gone in, I would have advanced.

As I called Beth to tell her about what happened, in my mind was a very personal question—

“Did God care about the results that day?”

To put it another way, as the title of this book asks, “Does God care who wins?”

While this question may not be an important one for everyone who plays, coaches, or spectates sports, it was critical for me that day. This was not a theoretical question to be bantered about in bars, on sports TV programs, or in the media in general; this question was a very personal one.

Our Journey

At the time of Q School, my wife and I were young but growing Christians. A few years before, during our senior year of college, we were exposed to the life-changing truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We heard and understood for the first time that there is a Creator. We heard that this God who created all we saw deeply desired an intimate, personal relationship with us. However, we learned that a barrier existed between us and God that we could do nothing to overcome, no matter how hard we tried. The good news we found out was that while we couldn't do anything, God was willing to do anything to remove that barrier. Out of his love, he was

willing even to send his Son, Jesus Christ, to live, die, and rise again to overcome this barrier to our relationship.

Those truths moved us. Deeply. In response, we accepted this offer from Jesus to do for us what we couldn't do for ourselves and became followers of Jesus Christ.

While the impact of our new relationship with God and his Son grew slowly at first, we learned more about Jesus and about what is involved in living as his followers. One of the important truths we learned through our involvement in a local church, small groups, a para-church ministry, and personal study was that Jesus Christ had a unique purpose for each of his followers in advancing his kingdom and values here on earth, not just for those in vocational ministry. As a result, after graduating from college and spending over two years as a chemical engineer in technical sales in the industrial chemicals business, we left business in pursuit of a career in professional golf in response to what we sensed was one aspect of his unique purpose for our lives.

We were now two years into the journey. Hopefully, you get a sense that as I called my wife that afternoon, this question, “Does God

care who wins?” was a very important and foundational one for both of us.

Imagine you are my wife on the other end of the phone line that day and I ask this question, “Does God care who wins? Does he care about the results out there today?” You realize the seriousness of this question and the weight of your answers. What would you say? Would your answer honor the question and the heart behind it or would your response dismiss the question as silly or petty? Would it bring comfort to my disappointment or minimize my pain no matter how well intentioned? Would it honor God and draw my heart to him or leave me distant from him? Would it empower me to press in on the disappointment I felt that day or lead me away from further competition?

Many years later, I am a long way from the pursuit of professional golf as an expression of my unique purpose but not from the answer to this question. In fact, my passion today is far greater than it was back then. However, now my passion isn’t just about my personal answer to the question. These days I am involved in sports ministry, particularly the expression of sports ministry in and through local churches in the United States

and around the world. In that role, I get the opportunity to interact with thousands of players, coaches, and parents. I have found many of them for whom this question is also personal and foundational. This involvement has stirred my passion for others who wrestle with this question.

I write this book with them in mind and for all the others I haven't met who are more than casual in their approach to sports and spirituality. I write to you who are invested in both arenas and wonder at the integration of the two, who find the common answers to this question leaving you wanting.

Does God care who wins? It is a big question that needs unpacking. The issues and answers are more important than you think.