

PERSONNEL PERSPECTIVES

Lead with your brain, not fists

By VINCE ALFONSO

Have you ever seen a golf professional, general manager or golf course owner in a fist fight with one of their patrons or members? Probably not. But I'd bet my bippy (By the way, what the heck is a bippy, anyway?) that you have witnessed a shouting match or

two along your golfing way. Is there a better way? I think so.

We had just proclaimed ourselves the first daily-fee course in the Memphis [Tenn.] metropolitan area. It was my first big outing at Golf Holiday Club and I was a bit nervous. About half the groups were through the turn

and all was going well.

Suddenly, my eye caught three bags on a golf car pointed at No. 10 tee. I thought, "Did a car break down? Did a player have to walk from who knows where? Could it have been the meeting planner?"

Immediately, I scurried through the snack bar area trying to locate the affected player. Finally, I found him. After I offered a new golf car and apologized profusely for the breakdown, this guy stands up

(BIG GUY) and says: "My golf car didn't break down. I never had a golf car. I'm walking. I just have my bag on there."

I explained how relieved I was that there was no breakdown, as I looked him in his shirt placket. I then proceeded to ask him politely to remove his bag since we only allowed two bags per car. Well, let's just say he said a lot of things, but the last thing he said and did was poke his pointer fin-

ger in my chest repeatedly, telling me that if I wanted that bag off the golf car, I'd have to take it off.

The entire episode happened in full view of other patrons and my staff. In spite of his size, for a brief moment — a very brief moment — I contemplated retaliation of the obvious kind. However, my Daddy's words as to how to handle problem customers flooded my brain: "Be smart. Don't stoop to their level. Think your way out." And even though Daddy didn't say much about what to do if some big palooka poked his finger in your chest a few times, I was absolutely sure of what not to do.

As he left the shop pointing at me and telling me to come and take his bag off the golf car if I thought I could, young Billy Spartenberger, one of my golf car crew, said, "Let me have him, Vince." Then little Golden Glove flyweight champ Tommy Newsome, the other member of the golf car crew, said: "Let me bag him, Vince. He'll never know what hit him."

"Now, now fellows," I said, "let's quit smelling blood here. There's a better way to handle this. Just be patient."

After Mr. Palooka strolled down the 10th fairway, I jumped in a golf car and proceeded to find the meeting planner. I caught him about to hit his third shot on a par-five. I politely interrupted his concentration with my story. After being sure he understood how upsetting the event had been to me, I explained he had two options, and only two: Remove the offender from my golf course and bar him from returning, or round up all 60-odd players and leave as a group. Either way suited me, but he had to do one or the other, and he had to do it now.

I returned to the clubhouse to Billy's and Tommy's questions about what happened and what I had done. I simply said, "Wait."

Sure enough, in a few short minutes the meeting planner came riding past the clubhouse with Mr. Palooka in the passenger seat with his clubs between his legs. They proceeded to the parking lot, where Mr. Palooka was deposited and told to leave. Mr. Meeting Planner returned to the shop, apologized on his company's behalf for the incident and assured me that Mr. Palooka would not be joining them on their next golf outing.

If you are a golf professional, general manager or golf course owner, expect to have to take a little abuse every once in awhile. But when it happens, remember what my Daddy said, "Take a deep breath, stay calm, don't stoop to your offending customer's level and think your way out." It's a lot better way than all the other options. Just ask Tommy and Billy.

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