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The Open and the Coach

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
The Open and the Coach
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Golf is a sport in which the major opponent is the self. It is, to borrow from Yogi Berra, ninety percent mental and the other half is physical. The very early career of Jordan Spieth offers considerable evidence of the significance of the mental aspect of the game. At The Open, the premier Grand Slam event, Jordan Spieth did battle on Sunday with himself, and won.

Spieth's epic collapse at the 2016 Masters, when he lost a five stroke lead with nine holes to play, seems to have affected him ever since. After playing so very well in the first three rounds of The Open at Royal Birkdale on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, Spieth entered play on Sunday with a three-stroke lead over Matt Kuchar.

Spieth admitted after Sunday's victory that he did spend some time Saturday night thinking about the Master's collapse, and those thoughts multiplied when after four holes on Sunday his lead had vanished. It was an ugly start that began to play with Spieth's head, "I wasn't questioning myself as a closer, but I was questioning why I couldn't just perform the shots that I was before."

After the front nine, Kuchar and Spieth were at 8-under par, with Spieth carding four bogies in the first nine holes. The real drama lay ahead. On the 13th hole Spieth hit a ball far to the right, took a penalty stroke for an unplayable lie, took a drop on the adjacent driving range, and hit a recovery shot that let him escape with a bogie and a one stroke deficit. Shades of the Masters seem to be all over the place.

It was at this point that Spieth needed to take control of his head to save his game. And indeed it was the putt to save bogie

on the 13th that was the key. What followed was spectacular. Spieth went birdie, birdie, eagle, birdie, par. Kuchar played the same holes at two under par and it hardly mattered. There have been great finishes and great collapses at The Open. Certainly Spieth's Sunday finish will be remembered as one of the greatest individual finishes in the history of The Open.

It was a great finish for this young golfer who may turn out to be one of the greats of the game. He is just turning twenty-four this week and so there is a lot of time before the final assessment of Spieth's career will be made.

Unfortunately NBC's golf crew has already bestowed the crown of all-time great on Spieth's head, and the television coverage of The Open was marred by NBC's lopsided coverage and fawning over Spieth. It almost made me hope that Spieth would fail, and that is a disservice to this excellent young golfer.

The other item that caught my attention in the last few days was the death of John Kundla on Sunday at age 101. A member of the Basketball Hall of Fame, Kundla was the first coach of the Minneapolis Lakers, where there are actually lakes in the city. Kundla led his team to seven league championships in six years. The centerpiece of the team was the first notable big man of basketball, George Mikan. In twelve seasons with the Lakers Kundla's record was 466-319 and he coached six Hall of Fame players: Mikan, Jim Pollard, Vern Mikkelson, Slater Martin, Clyde Lovellette, and Elgin Baylor. Under Kundla the Lakers made the playoffs in all but one of those twelve seasons.

His basketball life was centered in Minneapolis. Kundla played college baseball and basketball at the University of Minnesota. He was hired as physical education teacher and basketball coach at Ascension Elementary School, a Catholic school on Minneapolis' Northside. In 1942 he was hired as baseball, basketball, and football coach at De La Salle high school in

Minneapolis, During World War II he served in the Navy, and following the war he coached one year at St. Thomas College in St. Paul before being hired to lead the Lakers.

Johnny Kundla became the first alumnus of the University of Minnesota to coach the Gopher basketball team when he left the Lakers for the Gophers in 1959. In nine seasons his record was 110-105. He was the first Gopher basketball coach to offer a scholarship to an African-American player, and the first African-American to play for Kundla was Bobby Bell, better remembered for his football career. After stepping down as basketball coach, Kundla remained as a physical education instructor at the "U" until 1981.

As someone who grew up in Minneapolis and graduated from the Ascension School, De La Salle High School, and the University of Minnesota, as well as being a Laker fan, Johnny Kundla was a mythic character for me. I would occasionally see him around the gym at Ascension during AAU tournaments. My father knew him well and admired him. As a coach he was a quiet leader and carried himself with dignity, something I have never forgotten, particularly while watching the psychotic screamers on the sidelines who berate their players and game officials.

Johnny Kundla remains a Hall of Famer as a coach and a person, and someone who could serve as a role model for us all.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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