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Burton: PGA making big mistake

*Warsaw center director
Rick Burton says the
PGA has put itself in
a difficult situation*

By Rob Moseley
Sports Reporter

On the surface, golfer Casey Martin's plea to the Professional Golf Association to allow him use of a motorized cart in tour events seemed simple.

Martin, who has a debilitating disease in his right leg that makes it extremely painful for him to walk 18 holes, was suing for the use of a cart on PGA and Nike tour events not to gain an advantage, but to level the playing field.

The PGA Tour's recently increased fan base, however, will not see this as the case but as just another instance of "the big bad machine versus the poor individual," according to Rick Burton, the director of the University's Warsaw Sports Marketing Center.

Burton viewed the Martin case as a lose-lose situation for the PGA.

"In the court of popular opinion, the PGA can lose on two fronts," Burton said before the verdict was announced Wednesday. "If they succeed in taking the golf cart away from Casey Martin, whose handicap isn't even in question, then they risk alienating every handicapped fan in the country. If they lose and pout, meaning they appeal, it's the same deal."

"So I think they're in a very difficult situation."

Burton sees four main points as evidence the PGA will lose the Martin case in the theoretical court of public opinion, just as they did in reality.

The first involves public perception of the case not as an appeal for qualification under the Americans with Disabilities Act, but as an almost Dickensian case of a huge corporation against one crippled man.

"It's taking on a Scrooge and Tiny Tim kind of setting," Burton said. "The PGA has all the money and all the sponsors, all the television coverage and Tiger Woods, and here's Tiny Tim with his bad leg."

The second point, in Burton's view, is that most golfers in the United States, albeit not professionals, use carts when they play.

"Most people are asking, 'So what's the big deal here?'" he says. "And now, for the third thing, you've got a guy on the Nike Tour who says that riding in a cart may actually be a disadvantage."

Eric Johnson, who followed Martin's season-opening Nike Tour victory with one of his own a week later, testified at the trial that even if he had the opportunity to use a cart, he would prefer to walk.

Among the benefits of walking Johnson cited was the ability to get into a comfortable rhythm, which Martin's disability keeps him from attaining.

Lastly, Burton points to the fact that the PGA allows players on its Senior Tour to use carts. When confronted with the PGA Tour's argument that the Senior Tour is purely entertainment venture, Burton scoffs.

"That's a real stretch. Most people are going, 'So you're telling me these guys who are out there winning millions of dollars on the Senior Tour are just doing it for entertainment purposes?'"

However, the possible implications of this case are far greater than the simple loss of fan interest. Losing fans means losing sponsors, which means losing money, which means the future of the PGA Tour as an enterprise could hinge on the outcome of this case, Burton said.

Bob Combs, vice president of public relations for the PGA, refutes this assertion.

"Our sponsor relationships are very long-term," he said. "People get involved for long periods of time. One of the reasons they do that is they are attracted to the fundamental nature of the game. They respect our stand on this issue."

Included among the sponsors in question is Nike, the lead sponsor of the tour and of the PGA Tour's most visible participant, Tiger Woods.

Martin recently became the focus of Nike's new "I Can" advertising campaign, but Combs noted the separation between the company's sponsorship and marketing interests.

"Certainly Nike is a fundamental part of the Nike Tour," he said, "but they exist first and foremost to sell products. We are in no position to dictate their marketing strategy to them."

One positive aspect of a trial in the court of public opinion, and an advantage for the PGA Tour, Burton contends, is the speed with which the theoretical court moves on to its next case, regardless of whether a verdict has come in on the last one.

"Americans, and especially our media, have short-term memories because we're scandal junkies," Burton said. "First it was Marv Albert and his case, then Latrell Sprewell; this week it's Casey Martin. Two weeks from now it'll be something else, and we'll just move on to the next great injustice or the next great scandal."

Depending on the outcome of the PGA Tour's probable appeal, that next great scandal could be the PGA Tour's only hope for a quiet end to what has become, according to a recent ESPN SportsZone poll, the biggest sports-related issue in the country.

Bellotti hires Gregory as secondary coach

Oregon head football coach Mike Bellotti announced he has hired Willamette defensive coordinator Bob Gregory as the Ducks' defensive secondary coach.

The 34-year-old Gregory joined the Willamette coaching staff as its secondary coach in 1991 after two years as a graduate assistant coach at Oregon. He became Willamette's defensive coordinator in 1992.

Gregory's Willamette defense led the nation in scoring defense (10.2 points per game) and total defense (189.5 yards a game) as the Bearcats went 13-1 in 1997, losing to Findlay (Ohio) 14-7 in the NAIA championship game.

The addition of Gregory, whose Oregon contract runs through June 30, 1999, at an annual salary of \$69,500, reunites him with former Willamette defensive consultant Bob Foster. Foster was hired as the Oregon defensive coordinator last month.

Gregory graduated from Washington State in 1987. He began his collegiate career as a walk-on defensive back and linebacker before earning a scholarship.

He began his coaching career at Washington University in St. Louis, Mo., in 1987 before moving on to Oregon as a defensive aide in 1989.

—from The Associated Press

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