

The College Golf Recruiting Process; Don't Let Anchors Sink Your Chances

Brendan Ryan*

Golf Placement Services, 1304 Denman Ct, Wesley Chapel, FL 33543, USA

**Corresponding Author: Brendan Ryan, Golf Placement Services, 1304 Denman Ct, Wesley Chapel, FL 33543, USA, Email: brendan@bmrmanagement.com*

ABSTRACT

This paper is a typology of two prospective student athletes and their families' college search processes. Although the story is fictional, the two students and their families are based upon data collected through numerous observations and interviews with families in search of college golf scholarships over my twenty years in college golf as a player, coach and now advisor. These narrative and ideas are meant to invoke thought and reflection among not only professional coaches and parents but also prospective student athletes, some of whom may be in their early teens.

INTRODUCTION

After an introduction to a typical conversation between parents at a junior golf tournament, readers are provided with an analysis of the conversation through the lens of heuristics with a focus on the work from Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman. Heuristics, or mental shortcuts, are common in all areas of life, including the college recruiting process. Through the story, the paper hopes to introduce prospective student athletes and their families to these heuristics, helping them develop better strategies which may lead to a more positive recruiting experience.

A NORMAL DAY AT THE COURSE

"Now on the tee, from Windermere, Florida, Mr. Stephen Hay" said the announcer on the first tee of the Florida Junior Tour event, followed by some light applause from a group of parents, participants. As the applause ended, Stephen, who was already standing behind the ball, took his stance and smashed a driver down the middle of the fairway, picking up the tee quickly. He and the other competitors started down the first fairway at Falcon's Fire Golf Club.

As the players started down the fairway, Mrs. Hay, Stephen's mother, heard a voice enquire "are you Stephen's mother?" She turned around to be greeted by a burly man, in his early sixties, wearing neat golf attire topped by a Titleist visor. "I'm Gary's dad, Gary Tincup, Sr. Wanted to introduce myself".

"Yes, yes, I am" replied Mrs. Hay to Gary Sr., as they shook hands. "Very nice to meet you. I'm Claire Hay. Where are you from?"

"We're down from New York City. Gary's a junior in high school and wanted to get some rounds in. Ya know, college coaches want to see you play a lot of tournaments!" exclaimed Gary.

"Isn't that the truth?" said Claire. Claire was excited to be at this tournament. She was new to the world of junior golf and was not a golfer. She was hoping that Gary might provide some insight into what they were doing for their son and this whole world, as frankly it seemed to be overwhelming, despite spending hours searching the internet for nuggets of information.

Before Claire could get anything else out, Gary asked, "What year is your son?"

Claire paused and then figured out Gary meant graduation year. "Oh, yes, he's a junior also", she responded.

"Oh, excellent" responded Gary. "So, you guys must be well along in the recruitment process. Is he committed or still making visits?"

Claire's heart started to race, committed? Visits? It was barely December of his junior year. Although being athletic, Stephen had only one year of high school golf and one year of tournaments. Were they behind? Was it too late? Was she a bad parent? Had she made mistakes which would prevent Stephen from playing college golf? She could feel her heart pounding, but tried to be stoic when responding "just a

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couple of local places like University of Central Florida and South Florida, you?"

"Good programs. We have really focused on Newsweek's list of top 100 colleges with a goal of getting something in the top 25, preferably in the Ivy League. It's practically done. His guidance counselor said that with his test scores, it was probably a done deal" responded Gary, Sr.

"Oh wow" responded Claire, who now felt really embarrassed. "Any one school in particular? Have you visited?"

"Likely Penn. Gary wants business and Wharton is excellent. Gary's been to the coach's camp a couple of times and toured the campus" Gary paused, "well, I guess six times, now. We've also hired SAT tutors and someone to help with the application. He's already gotten 1350, but we know that can be 1500 which is not problem with his extra-curricular activities.

Wow, Claire thought; Tutors? Camps? Application help? Although intuitively Claire thought that Stephen should take care of the process himself, she now was starting to think otherwise; maybe Stephen needed help and fast.

THE HEURISTICS OF COLLEGE RECRUITING

The world of junior golf is filled with countless anchors which nudge parents into believing that their children are more than likely on a path to college golf, with a scholarship. This belief is perpetuated by Junior Tours, College Recruiting Agents, Writers and Golf Teaching professionals which have helped grow junior golf in America into a very lucrative business. When starting the search process, parents often calibrate their child's college based on their assessment of other players. This thinking is the foundation of the type of short cuts that will be discussed throughout the analysis and are described in the academic context as "heuristics". There are different types of heuristics. One of the most famous, discovered by Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman is anchoring; using someone or something as a frame of reference and drawing broad conclusions based on incomplete data. This happens all the time in junior golf. For example, Claire might see that Gary, Jr and Stephen at the end of the day have similar scores. Although it's only one data point, parents like Claire often decisively conclude that their son might also have a chance at an elite academic school like Penn. In doing so, they have fallen prey to what is called a "heuristic" or mental short cut in making a complicated decision. Wait; what? If Gary Jr can go to Penn, surely

Stephen can too? Of course, that is possible but only *if* Gary Jr can go to Penn in the first place; and *if* he also has very similar golf and grades, test scores, extracurricular activities and so on. Those are two big ifs, yet it's common for parents to jump to the conclusion that the boys are identically qualified across the broad spectrum of requirements for a college scholarship. It is in these details where many students, parents and coaches rely too heavily on speculation, when the facts and details matter immensely.

Anchoring can also impact the academic part of the search for families. In the story, like many families in the college search process, Gary defaults a "list" of the best colleges. After reviewing the list, the family starts to pick where they think might be a good fit. Seems reasonable; however it's not; the family has created an illusion that they are shopping for a school and have the leverage to pick where they want. This type of process creates a fixed mindset and expectations that ignores the overwhelming data that even elite candidates' kids get rejected from prestigious schools all the time (it's not shopping folks).

Frank Bruni, a New York Times columnist and author of the bestselling book "where you'll go is not who you'll be" explains that parents and advisors should ignore college rankings, because they are no more than "rickety assumptions" that foster the false belief that so called "elite" schools provide students with an unequivocal advantage as they launch their careers. According to Bruni, the ideology that one school is better than the other is at best misleading, and at worst the catalyst for the destruction of self-discovery, motivation, and unhappiness for millions of adolescents. "What's troubling about the fixation on a small cluster of colleges to the exclusion of others isn't just the panic that it promotes in the people clamouring at the gates, [it's] the unwarranted feelings of failure that it creates in kids who don't make it through." Bruni's data also suggests that attendance at such academic institutions does not necessarily warrant success on the part of the student. A study cited in his book of more than 550 leaders in business, politics, and non-profit groups found 2/3 of these leaders did not attend "elite" colleges. Furthermore, such colleges also do not necessarily produce smarter students. In fact, Bruni's analysis of Mac Arther Genius Grants from 2009-2014 in the book suggests that more than half of winners came from public universities or private schools that many would not generally consider amongst the highest tier. This ties into the narrative of the story; the Gary Sr. character

sees the college decision as getting his child into the best ranked school (something that will impress his social circling), rather than seeing college as a step in gaining credentials and experience towards a larger goal; becoming a capable adult.

The nuance of college choice is also described eloquently by Malcolm Gladwell in his book "David vs. Goliath", where he tells the story of Caroline Sacks. In the story Sacks changes her major after being overwhelmed by the high-octane competition of an Ivy League university. In his analysis, Gladwell demonstrates how Ms. Sacks would have been better off at a less-selective, less-demanding institution, making a strong case for the merits of being a "Big Fish in a Little Pond." While parents are quick to reach for their top 100 list, many would be surprised to know that there is no academic research which ties the academic ranking to the long-term success of students either in terms of happiness or financial gains. Instead, the research suggests a benefit to earning a bachelor's degree but does not qualify the difference between those from Campbell University or Harvard. In fact, research from Karen Arnold from Boston College suggests that valedictorians rarely go on to become millionaires. Instead, the average millionaire GPA of a millionaire? 2.9.

Yet another anchor in the recruiting process is June 15th of the prospective student athlete's Junior Year. It is on this date, that the NCAA allows College Coaches to begin the recruiting process. For the top athletes this might mean upwards of 100 calls, texts and emails, while on the other end of the spectrum thousands of kids will receive zero inquires. Either way, this provides players with clear feedback on the value of their skills as perceived by coaches, providing yet another signal to create a recruiting strategy over the next two years.

Does this mean that players who do not receive a letter on June 15th, are destitute? Absolutely not; players have over two years until they enroll in school. This is a lot of time to put together a plan and improve options. The question is, beyond a focus on grade point average and standardize test, what stat is most closely related to success in the college search? Over the past three years, Golf Placement Services, my own company, has analyzed public data on the college recruiting classes for men's and women's golf, examining broad sets of data and how they relate to college signing. After careful examination, the data sent a clear message that

one anchor matters a lot: scoring differential. Scoring differential, or what the junior golfer averages versus the course rating, is in fact very closely related to where students end up signing to play college golf. In fact, over the last 3 years, the data for men's golf has been extremely consistent; to play Division I Golf, a boy must be ranked about 350 in their class with a scoring differential of about +.5. For boys to play major conference golf, they must be ranked in approximately the top 100, with a scoring differential of -.5. Likewise, girls who play Division 1 Golf typically have a scoring differential of 3.5 or better. So, the message is simple; get your scoring differential lower to increase your odds of getting recruited.

CONCLUSION

Empowered with a better understanding of heuristics; read the story of Gary Jr. and Stephen again. The story should read less as a narrative and more of a comedy of errors. Was the information exchanged by the parents even close to enough data to draw any conclusions? Certainly not, but all the time prospective student athletes, parents, coaches and members of the junior golf community engage in these unsophisticated conversations trying to decipher the college golf recruiting code. Ironically, it is in these conversations that they get thrown off; they let irrelevant details nudge their plan off course. What should a prospective student athlete and their family to do? Be mature enough to properly identify and ignore the irrelevant elements of heuristics which victimize other families and focus time and energy to those factors which significantly impact the recruiting process; scoring differential, grades and test scores.

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