

SECOND PLACE RECIPIENT

Beyond the Scorecard

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When I became captain of my junior golf team, I thought leadership meant encouraging my teammates, helping less-experienced players, and setting a good example. I did not expect that one of the hardest parts would be choosing fairness when it came at the expense of my own team.

Every stroke mattered during the final round of our junior golf tour championship. On the 14th hole, my teammate and close friend, Elle, sliced her tee shot deep into the thick rough near the tree line. I walked over to help her search through the tall grass. When she finally found her ball, she carefully rested her club behind it. Suddenly, her clubhead lightly tapped the ball, causing it to roll. It was a one-stroke penalty for causing a ball at rest to move. Elle froze. She knew exactly what had happened.

Golf is unique because it relies heavily on the honor system. There are no referees watching every move, no cameras following every shot, and no opponent had seen the ball move. In that quiet moment near the trees, a heavy hesitation settled between us. My chest tightened as my mind began to race.

If I stayed silent, no one would ever know. Our team could preserve its narrow lead for the championship, Elle would avoid embarrassment, and our friendship would remain untouched. If I spoke up, the extra stroke could cost us the title and potentially ruin a close friendship. I wrestled with whether protecting Elle from an embarrassing situation was worth compromising the fairness owed to every other competitor on the course.

I wanted so badly to ignore it, but I knew staying silent would make me just as responsible. Taking a breath, I pulled Elle aside privately. The air felt thick with tension as I awkwardly said, “Elle, we have to count that touch.” She was clearly frustrated, caught between the pressure of the match and the sting of her mistake. That single stroke rattled her focus: Elle went on to quadruple-bogey the hole, and our team lost the championship by a single point.

The team dinner afterward was heavy and quiet. Some of my teammates even questioned why I brought up a mistake no one else had seen. For a moment, I questioned myself too and regretted my decision of speaking up. But later that night, my phone lit up with a text from Elle. She apologized for how she had reacted and thanked me for holding us to the right standard.

I learned that doing the right thing rarely feels heroic in the moment. Sometimes, it means accepting consequences you desperately wanted to avoid and having a difficult conversation even when silence would be easier.