

## The Spalding 7 and Titleist 3:23

Jerry Woodfill

“MOON LANDING WAS A HOAX! We never went!” - was the headline of the *Weekly World News* displayed at the Kroger checkout counter. “I could use that for the space calendar I’m working on.” At least, the thought was so preposterous no one would accept it as true. I needed an entry for March 5, 1991, the date of the issue.

The project had a notable event in space history for each day of the year. Something for March 5<sup>th</sup> had not been forthcoming. This was it. As an educational exercise, I suggested teachers and students examine the article then refute its contentions based on solid science. Ten years later, my innocent posting on the Internet had grown into a vast horde of conspiracy theorists, contending that the article was factual. Then, the Fox network collected the ridiculous assertions and broadcast them as a documentary. Soon, school children were asking me, “Did we actually land men on the Moon?”

Most see NASA types as humorless studious engineering/scientists devoid of personality and imagination. Such is not the case. I can’t forget one Joe Deserackis, an early, pre-Manned Spacecraft Center employee. He had a desk, a phone entry in the NASA directory, and a glowing biographical background. Unfortunately, he had no body. Mischief makers, among our kind, conceived him as a practical joke on NASA personnel.

But this “no-moon-landing” nonsense was dangerous to American youth. For if Neil Armstrong had not gone, then what was sacred about any event in American history? Landing on the moon was considered among the most notable. If it be a hoax, nothing in history books could be trusted. This led to an inventory of my years as a Brantwoodian. Had I perpetrated anything so bogus as those claiming a lunar conspiracy?

At once, I thought about the subtle ways I’d cheated in golf. Compared to most who played that “damnable” game of nerves, ethics, and challenges to total honesty, I was angelic. Yet, I had moments of depraved dishonesty, though none compared to the heinous collection of cheating schemes performed by Jack Lickler. His artful-nefarious craft rivaled that of the greatest bank thief. No communist spy of the KGB could have equaled Jack’s undercover operations on the links. On more than one occasion, I knew he’d cheated to keep his handicap beneath mine, but I could only suspect, never prove his acts of golf criminality.

I’d compare him to a magician whose world class show stopping trick looks so real as to be considered supernatural. Yet, none can decode his technique. He goes to the grave with his secret intact. That was Jack, the golf cheat. I could only attempt to simulate his art, fuming hours after he’d beat me on the Woodmar par 70 eighteen hole course:

In order to thwart his propensity for cheating, I’d establish rules before we launched our first drive. Hopefully, these would discourage his felonious ways. First, I’d ask him whose ball he was playing and its number. He always bought Spalding golf balls from the Lansing sports discounter. That day, it happened to be a Spalding 7.

All was well until the 13<sup>th</sup> hole when Jack hit a wicked slice off the tee that surely passed out-of-bounds over the barbed wire fence bordering the course. Because my shot landed on the opposite side of the hole, I momentarily lifted the surveillance. Predictably, Jack found his ball had not sailed across the penalty marker as it appeared. In fact, he had a wonderful lie in the rough such that his following shot to the green won him a par. I settled for a bogey five. I

knew he’d cheated, and, like a g-man about to bust a felon, I beat Jack to the cup, grabbed his ball as evidence that he had switched it for the one hit out-of-bounds.

“Unbelievable!” It was a Spalding 7. I had no case. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, Jack’s ball rolled under a Weeping Willow tree on his approach to the Green. Indiana Weeping Willows have dense branches hanging from the top center to the ground like Ringo Starr’s Beatle hair cut. No golf swing is possible under its foliage. Appropriately named, the Weeping Willow brought sorrowful cries from unfortunates hoping for a par.

I’d dealt with that predicament. It led to an evil thought, “If I used my putter like a pool cue, with the grip-end to strike the ball, perhaps, I could escape the mesh of leafage.” I checked the rule-book. Such was illegal. So I watched Jack disappear beneath that jungle-like vegetation.

“I’ve got him here,” was my gleeful inner exclamation. Carefully, I scrutinized that tree, expecting vituperative-vial shouts of golf-links profanity to come forth. Nothing was heard, but what I saw was as mystifying as any Houdini magical performance. Jack emerged from those hanging Willow vines, as though he was Livingston freed from jungle captivity.

“But where was his ball?”

He continued, distancing himself from the tree. Behind the green, where a modest chip shot would place him at a single putt’s distance from the hole, I heard Jack’s voice.

“Here it is, my Spalding 7...must have got a good bounce and run under that tree.” Once more, Jack bested my bogey with a par. And, yes, I checked again. It was the same Spalding 7 he’d driven off the 16<sup>th</sup> tee.

Now, all, at some time, in some form or fashion, cheat at golf. It’s biblical, like, “All have sinned (cheated in golf) and fall short of the glory of God.” (Titleist 3:23) So, on occasion, I wasn’t above cheating. I’d employed the “foot-mashie” more than once on a ball imbedded in a fairway divot. But those infrequent instances were misdemeanors compared to Jack’s fairway felonies.

Both our drives on the 17<sup>th</sup> seemed equally long, perhaps, 220 yards, mine to the left, his to the right, slightly

in the rough. Yet, when I reached mine, I saw him continue to walk erect, Bag Boy cart in tow, a full fifty yards farther. This gave him a modest nine iron to the hole for his par. I struggled for a bogey. Angry at his obvious act of cheating, I “topped” my six iron shot. Of course, the ball I pulled from the cup, along with mine, was Jack’s Spalding 7.

There was no doubt about it. My ability at golf exceeded Jack’s. One could simply judge our shots on the practice range and come to that conclusion. Yet, Jack’s handicap was 10 and mine 13. What makes golf such a great game for cheaters is the lack of a victim. A bank robber takes someone’s savings. A drug pusher damages those who buy his narcotics. Blackmailers, embezzlers, and burglars have victims.

Weekend golfers don’t, except where there is a competitive rivalry between friends. I was Jack’s victim because of this.

Jack was a proponent of the *Mulligan*. In his mind, this was sort of like a marriage annulment, i.e., the marriage or golf shot never really happened because it was ones first marriage or first golf shot of the day. He explained it like this.

“Jerry, say we are supposed to tee-off at 8:00 AM. I hit my shot. Then a lightning bolt strikes. There is a fierce rain. Our golf game has to be restarted later. Well, that shot I took at 8:00 AM is simply a Mulligan. It never happened. It doesn’t count This is a new start. So every first shot has the potential of being a Mulligan, if we choose.”

At first, I agreed with Jack’s logic but then the concept horrified me: Imagine, a birth Mulligan – i.e., God deems you a dubbed shot, picks you off the fairway of life, and has your parents try again. What about a face Mulligan for an ugly person – I guess that would be plastic surgery.

Jack had a similar explanation about why a “wiff” shouldn’t count as a stroke, “Jerry, look at it this way. A wiff is when you swing but don’t hit the ball, even though you intended to...now, isn’t a practice swing when you do the same, i.e., swing and miss the ball. Who’s to know whether you intended to hit it or were practicing? No one’s a mind-reader. No wiff should ever be counted as a stroke.”

I had to admit it. Jack’s arguments would put the most competent trial lawyer to the test. How was I ever going to control his cheating? I might as well cheat along with him. At least, this would normalize the situation, and my handicap would show that I was better than he was.

Then it happened on a visit to that Lansing sports emporium to buy some tees and golf balls. When I began to select a brand, I noticed they always came in lots of a dozen. But, suddenly, I recognized what Jack had been doing. He’d buy all Spalding 7s, by the lot. Somehow, he was stowing a vast number of them in his bag, on his person, in his jacket and pants pockets. When he’d hit that Spalding 7 out-of-bounds, the substitute Spalding 7 was dropped near the fence while I was searching for my ball. Likewise, when it seemed his Spalding 7 ended up under that Weeping Willow Tree, he had simply left it there, and dropped another Spalding 7 behind the green when I wasn’t looking.

“But how did he make that drive sail fifty yards beyond mine?” I’d watched him carefully. Like a divine message from God’s angelic golfing hosts, an answer came.

“That cheater had a hole in his pocket.”

“Yes. That’s how he did it.”

The Spalding 7 in his pocket had dribbled down his pants leg into the rough. Somebody was finding quite a few Spalding 7s inadvertently left on the course. They were Jack’s. At once, a plan, as nefarious as any of Jack’s cheating schemes, came to mind. It was expensive, but well worth it, if it brought Jack to justice. I bought twelve dozen Spalding balls. Each box had a different number on the Spalding balls. The first was a box of Spalding 1s, another of Spalding 2s, the third of Spalding 3s, and on and on. The last dozen being Spalding 12s. Next, I collected one ball from each box and hid them in a pocket in my golf bag.

I waited for the junior club tournament, the day when my scheme would most impact Jack. We were in the same foursome. The opportune moment came when Jack chose to relieve himself just before we teed off. Quickly, I collected the dozen randomly numbered Spalding balls from my bag and substituted them for his Spalding 7s. When he returned, I threw him one of his Spalding 7s with the comment, “Here’s to you Jack...may the best golfer win.”

When he saw it was a Spalding 7, he was satisfied to place it on the tee. I saw a ball bulging in his side pocket. Assuredly, it was a Spalding 7. I took comfort in knowing that would be the only substitute he would pull off today.

All was well until the 4<sup>th</sup> hole. I led by a stroke when Jack’s approach shot sliced off line into a pond on the far left. Since I didn’t see it skip across the water onto the other side, I knew Jack’s lone substitute Spalding 7 was soon to be used.

And, of course, it was, as Jack exclaimed, “I’ve had something of a miracle. My Spalding 7 got legs and walked on water.”

“That will be the last miracle Jack gets today.” I chuckled quietly.

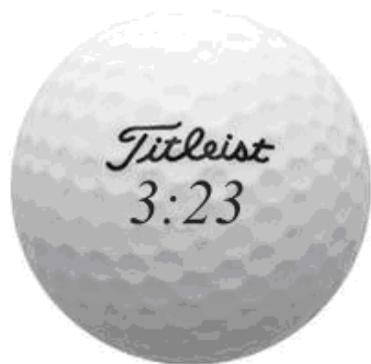
To Jack’s credit, he was playing so well that he really didn’t need to cheat. In fact, by the 13<sup>th</sup> hole he was beating me fairly. It had to be an act of ironic justice, the same out-of-bounds hole, the same dubbed shot. Resolutely, Jack marched toward that same fence in search of his Spalding 7. I watched him pause midway to the mark. He squatted behind his bag which hid his body from our view. Obviously, he was unzipping his cache of Spalding 7s to substitute one for his errant shot. He would save two penalty strokes by cheating.

The other golfers in our group noticed Jack hadn’t moved though the rest of us had reached our drives preparing to hit a second shot.

“Jack,” one yelled, “You’re holding up the tournament...come on.” Slowly, Jack walked on, to the spot his Spalding 7 took flight abroad from the confines of Woodmar’s 13<sup>th</sup> hole.

What he said next was very sweet to hear...

“Fellows, my ball is out of bounds. I can’t find it. I’ll be hitting a Spalding 5 and taking two strokes penalty.”



### The Spalding 7 and Titleist 3:23 Comprehension Questions

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Who are the main characters in the short story?
  - a. the author and Jack Lickler
  - b. the golf balls
  - c. Arnold Palmer and Sam Sneed
  - d. the Woodmar Pro and his caddy
2. \_\_\_\_\_ How many times did Jack cheat in the story?
  - a. never
  - b. too many to count
  - c. three times
  - d. once
3. \_\_\_\_\_ How did Lickler cheat?
  - a. secretly switching balls
  - b. using the foot mashie
  - c. lying about his score
  - d. taking multiple "Mulligans."
4. \_\_\_\_\_ What does an Indiana Weeping Willow Tree look like?
  - a. a Beetle's hair cut.
  - b. a sorrowful golfer
  - c. a slender woman's torso
  - d. a weed
5. \_\_\_\_\_ How did the author stop Jack from cheating?
  - a. having the pro talk to him privately
  - b. leaving an anonymous note in his ball pouch
  - c. by secretly switching balls in his bag
  - d. threatening him with physical harm
6. How would you have stopped Jack Lickler from cheating? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. politely suggesting he had cheated
  - b. cheating also to get his attention
  - c. ignore Lickler's acts
  - d. None of the above. I would.....
7. Did the author ever cheat? \_\_\_\_\_  
Yes or No
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Do you think everyone cheats at golf somehow at sometime?  
Yes or No
9. \_\_\_\_\_ What does the author compare golf cheating to?
  - a. gambling
  - b. sin
  - c. magic tricks
  - d. loss of memory
10. \_\_\_\_\_ What is a Mulligan?
  - a. an Irish stew
  - b. a club named for a famous golfer
  - c. a rodent found in the woods
  - d. a second uncounted stroke for a bad shot
11. \_\_\_\_\_ What's a "wiff" in golf?
  - a. a rancid smell from the outhouse
  - b. a club used in the sand trap
  - c. a type of golf tee used on the fairway
  - d. a golfer missing the ball during the swing
12. \_\_\_\_\_ How did Jack justify not counting a *wiff*?
  - a. a noise had unfairly caused the wiff
  - b. it was a practice swing since it missed the ball
  - c. the club was defective causing the miss
  - d. something had inadvertently moved the ball
13. \_\_\_\_\_ Why does the title include the number 3:23?
  - a. it refers to the International Golf Rule 3:23
  - b. Jack Lickler cheated 23 times in 3 days
  - c. it's a verse about everyone cheating in some way
  - d. Jack's handicap of 23 strokes for 3 months
14. \_\_\_\_\_ How did Jack justify taking a *Mulligan* on the first shot on the first hole?
  - a. the first shot could be ignored by interruptions
  - b. on-lookers made him nervous
  - c. he had no time to warm-up his swing
  - d. a bad first shot would ruin the whole day
15. \_\_\_\_\_ Who was Joe Deserackis?
  - a. a famous 1950s professional golfer
  - b. one of the original seven Mercury astronauts
  - c. the caddy master at the Woodmar Country Club
  - d. a make believe NASA employee
16. \_\_\_\_\_ How did Lickler outdrive Jerry by 50 yards?
  - a. using a driver with a metal head
  - b. using a driver with a graphite shaft
  - c. letting the ball trickle from a pants pocket hole
  - d. kicking the ball while Jerry wasn't looking
17. \_\_\_\_\_ Why did Jack have only Spalding 7 golf balls?
  - a. only the best golfers used them
  - b. he cheated by substituting them for bad shots
  - c. his clubs were Spaldings
  - d. his deceased grandfather, a golf pro, used them

18. \_\_\_\_\_ Did Neil Armstrong actually land on the Moon?  
 a. the Moon shot and Jack's golf shots were fake  
 b. the Weekly World News said it didn't happen  
 c. Yes, Jerry proved the Weekly World News wrong  
 d. Fox news aired a documentary calling it a fake
19. \_\_\_\_\_ What movie was filmed at Jerry's work place?  
 a. *High Noon*  
 b. *From the Earth to the Moon*  
 c. *West World*  
 d. *2001 Space Odyssey*
20. \_\_\_\_\_ What did Jerry think he'd do to hit a shot from under the Weeping Willow?  
 a. grip a putter just above its head and swing  
 b. use the club like pool cue  
 c. detach the club head into his hand and swing  
 d. with the club head touching the ball, kick it

9. nefarious                      evil  
 10. mystify                      fool  
 11. depravity                      foulness  
 12. misdemeanor                      wrong-doing  
 13. predicament                      dilemma  
 14. conspiracy                      evil alliance  
 15. horde                      collect greedily  
 16. bogus                      fake  
 17. slice                      errant shot to right  
 18. bogey                      one shot over par  
 19. par                      ideal strokes for a hole  
 20. foliage                      mass of leaves

**The ball which brought Jack Lickler to justice.**

**New Spelling Words From the Story (Look them up in your dictionary.)**

- |                 |                   |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1. preposterous | ridiculous        |
| 2. thwart       | stop              |
| 3. propensity   | inclination       |
| 4. felonious    | criminal, illegal |
| 5. scrutinize   | study, examine    |
| 6. opportune    | fortuitous, lucky |
| 7. resolute     | dedicated         |
| 8. cache        | storage place     |

For extra credit: Do you think this is a true story, partially true, or altogether made up?

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