

# **“In the Hole!”**

## **A Study of Social Deviance at Golf Tournaments**

By

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A healthy young athlete stands on the tee box of the sixteenth tee of a major professional golf tournament. He is surrounded by thousands of spectators waiting for him to hit his drive. The tee box is in the midst of hundreds of beautiful flowering shrubs and the sun is shining brightly. It is so quiet that if a cone were to fall from a nearby pine tree, nearly everyone would hear it. The golfer approaches the ball, waggles his club and slowly pulls the club back from the ball in a long circular back swing arc. With an explosive athletic move, he drives his club into the ball and propels that small white ball nearly three hundred yards down the five hundred yard fairway.

The only sounds are of the club face meeting the ball, the spectators going “ahhh” and of one person shouting, “In the hole!” at the top of his lungs. Why shout, “In the Hole!” when it is obvious that even the best golfers do not drive the ball five hundred yards? Yelling, “Wow!” or “Great Shot!” or even “Thata way Bob!” seems appropriate, but shouting “In the Hole!” seems completely unlikely, inappropriate and even a bit annoying since it is repeated over and over at golf tournaments by certain fans that appear to be out of touch with what has been happening!

Dr. Daniel Alan, noted behavioral scientist and, Director of the Social Skills Institute, has been studying this phenomenon for nearly ten years along with colleague Dr. Wilbur Stanley, and will be sharing their findings in a coming issue of the **Journal of Social Pathology Research**.

How did Drs. Alan and Stanley get started on such an unusual project when the prestigious Social Skills Institute usually conducts research for companies about work related behavioral problems or political candidates/issues? (See Dr. Alan's landmark 1999 study, "Why Sally Hates Her Boss!" and his memorable 2006 study, "Why Voters Vote for Candidates Whom They Know Are Dishonest." When asked why his scholarly institute has undertaken a study of folks shouting at golf tournaments, Dr. Alan said:

Well, I was attending my first golf tournament about a few years ago and was taken by unusual behaviors being exhibited by several spectators. The first was of a handsome young man wearing a rainbow colored wig and carrying a sign urging others, and by the way he positioned himself around the green, the television audience, to read a certain verse in the Bible.

He seemed quite adept at selecting a location where the camera showing a golfer putting would situate him, and his sign, in the background. He seemed to be getting into lots of television shots and was being seen by millions of viewers. The second behavior that attracted my attention was of one a rather pudgy young man, who seemed to be following the

tournament leader, and after every shot the professional golfer made, would shout, "In the hole!" in a loud, shrill voice. He did this whether the golfer was hitting from the tee box more that six hundred yards from the hole, or from under a tree limb with the green completely out of sight! When I was having coffee with several of my colleagues at the Institute the next morning, I commented on these rather unusual behaviors I had observed at the tournament and my colleagues asked my opinion of what motivated these fellows to do what they were doing.

Off the top of my head, I said that the multiple colored hair fellow seemed to be trying to get others, primarily the television audience, to ascribe to his views and was using the mass media to get his points across. His behavior seemed to be altruistic. I said that the "shouter" seemed to be trying to get attention for his "irrational" encouragement, even though most of those standing nearby seemed to be treating him with distain.

This fellow's behavior seemed self-centered to me. Dr. Stanley, one of my senior fellows, was fascinated by this "shouting" behavior and asked that he be permitted to spend some time interviewing a few of these shouters to gain some insights into what motivates them to this behavior. In that Dr. Stanley had recently co-authored a study for "Fans Unite" magazine about the unruly behavior of professional athletes, I decided that this might not only be a fun joint project but would help Dr. Stanley in his effort to focus his behavioral research activities in the sports field. I agreed to work with him on this project.

Drs. Alan and Stanley used a grounded research design in which they themselves were participant observers. After having their proposed research study approved by a Human Subjects Review Board, they randomly selected, and attended, twenty-one golf tournaments during the next seven months. They indicated that “shouters” were quite amenable to being interviewed about their tournament behavior and their life patterns.

The researchers promised anonymity to each of the subjects and no one was paid for participating in this study. The only compensation received by any subject was a promise to send them a copy of the first journal article published about this research (“Behavioral Clues to the Behavior of Serial Shouters” **Journal of Social Pathology Research**, January 2008, pp.123-41). Each participant signed an informed consent waiver.

The research team identified forty-one serial shouters (SS). A serial shouter was defined as a person shouting “In the Hole” at four or more inappropriate times during a round of golf. Thirty-eight serial shouters agreed to be interviewed by Drs. Alan and Stanley. The three persons unavailable for interviews wished to be interviewed, but complicated travel plans on their part precluded these interviews from taking place. Subjects were interviewed in a private room with no other persons being present. The interviews were videotaped with the subject’s permission. All subjects agreed to be videotaped as long as their confidentiality was protected.

Thirty-five of the SS's said they were surprised that anyone would be interested in what they yelled at a golf match. All thirty-eight SS's realized that their shouts were annoying to other fans, but didn't seem to care (twenty-two indicated that they had paid their money and could yell what they wanted to yell, and the other sixteen shrugged their shoulders, laughed off the question or rolled their eyes).

Dr. Alan said they were quite surprised at this unexpected finding. They had not expected this degree of insight on the part of the participants, thinking instead that they were unaware of how their behavior was viewed by other people. Given that they knew their behavior annoyed others, one would wonder what drives them to this point. Why do they seek to be annoying? Do they have an unresolved need to annoy parents or partners and then project this impulse onto strangers?

According to Dr. Alan, an alternative interpretation is one of narcissism. They just wanted attention. Alfred Adler, the renowned Viennese psychiatrist, believed that when people feel annoyed, the goals of the offending person is to get attention. The goal is attention, whether it is for good or bad reasons. Dr. Alan stated, "This brings to mind one of my patients with a diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder. His father said never to leave a place without being noticed. His motto became, 'If I can't be famous, then I can be notorious.'" Consistent with this interpretation, almost all subjects were proud of being heard on television by someone they knew. One man said that he recorded all of

the tournaments he had attended and had heard himself twenty-six times during the last year, and then added, "More people have heard me than have heard my brother who is a professional speaker."

Each subject agreed to take the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory so that they could be assessed for serious character and/or psychiatric disorders. The results of this personological investigation also coincided with the earlier narcissistic interpretation. While thirty-one subjects were within the normal range, seven demonstrated noticeable deviant behavior and two of those admitted being institutionalized for mental disorders during the past two years.

Results of the personality assessment revealed that the typical SS scored in the eighty-fifth percentile or above on the self-centered/narcissistic scale, in the ninety-second percentile on the controlling/domineering scale and above the ninety-fourth percentile on the social deviancy scale. This means that the average SS is a controlling, self-centered, social outcast with few close friends. Only one of the subjects was currently married (seven had been married and were now divorced and thirty had never been married.) The average age of the SS's was thirty-one, the youngest was twenty-three and the oldest was fifty-five. All were men.

It is hard to imagine living a life so shallow that you seek to gain fame by shouting irrational, inappropriate sayings, which are annoying to others, but to some of the subjects it does appear that this attention gives meaning to their lives.

Looking stupid will get some the attention they desire, but it certainly does not get them the respect they crave. In the future, maybe some type of therapy groups might be made available for individuals desiring treatment for this aberrant behavior. The treatment should seek to turn their concentration from gaining attention and power from useless behavior to gaining self-respect from making contributions to others and society.

These folks need interventions, but not our acceptance, as that would be endorsing what has become a widespread and sordid problem for the followers and organizers of tournament golf. Dr. Adler recommended that the best treatment for attention-getters is to ignore their behavior. If we criticize them, they receive attention. Only pretending that they did not do anything will frustrate their goal of garnering attention.

Can these shouters be cured? According to Dr. Alan, "Probably not because of the deep-seated problems these individuals have, but they can be helped to reduce their shouting behaviors and thereby make golf tournaments more enjoyable for everyone. Something needs to be done before the behavior of serial shouters attracts other social deviants and this problem becomes epidemic." Dr. Stanley added, "One behavioral intervention would be to catch serial shouters in the act of being good. They want attention, so give it to them when they do things we appreciate. Then these narcissistic supplies may alleviate their overwhelming need to annoy."

**When a touring pro was asked his opinion of people who shout “In the Hole,” he said: “Those guys are probably the same guys who mooned old ladies from car windows when they were in high school! When I hear them, I think “Dufus!” During the interview process, when one shouter was told what the pro had said, he laughed and said: “I never mooned anyone from a car window, but once I did moon two old ladies from the back of a pickup truck! They screamed, so I never did it again. As far as the Dufus thing...I don’t know what that means.”**

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Note: Dr. Austin is the pseudonym of Glenn Saltzman, Ph.D., an avid golfer who hates to have the serenity of a golf match spoiled by serial shouters. Dr. Saltzman is Emeritus Professor of Behavioral Science, Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine. He lives with his wife Ruth, and their dog, Orville, in Twin Lakes, Ohio. Daniel, Andrew, Connor and Austin are the names of the Saltzman’s grandsons. Although this research is fictitious, Dr. Saltzman believes it had a certain ring of truth to it.

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