

**The Lessons Of Leonardo**  
By Walter Isaacson  
**REVIEW**

**Yes, Puffer Coats Can Be Chic**  
**OFF DUTY**

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**WEEKEND**

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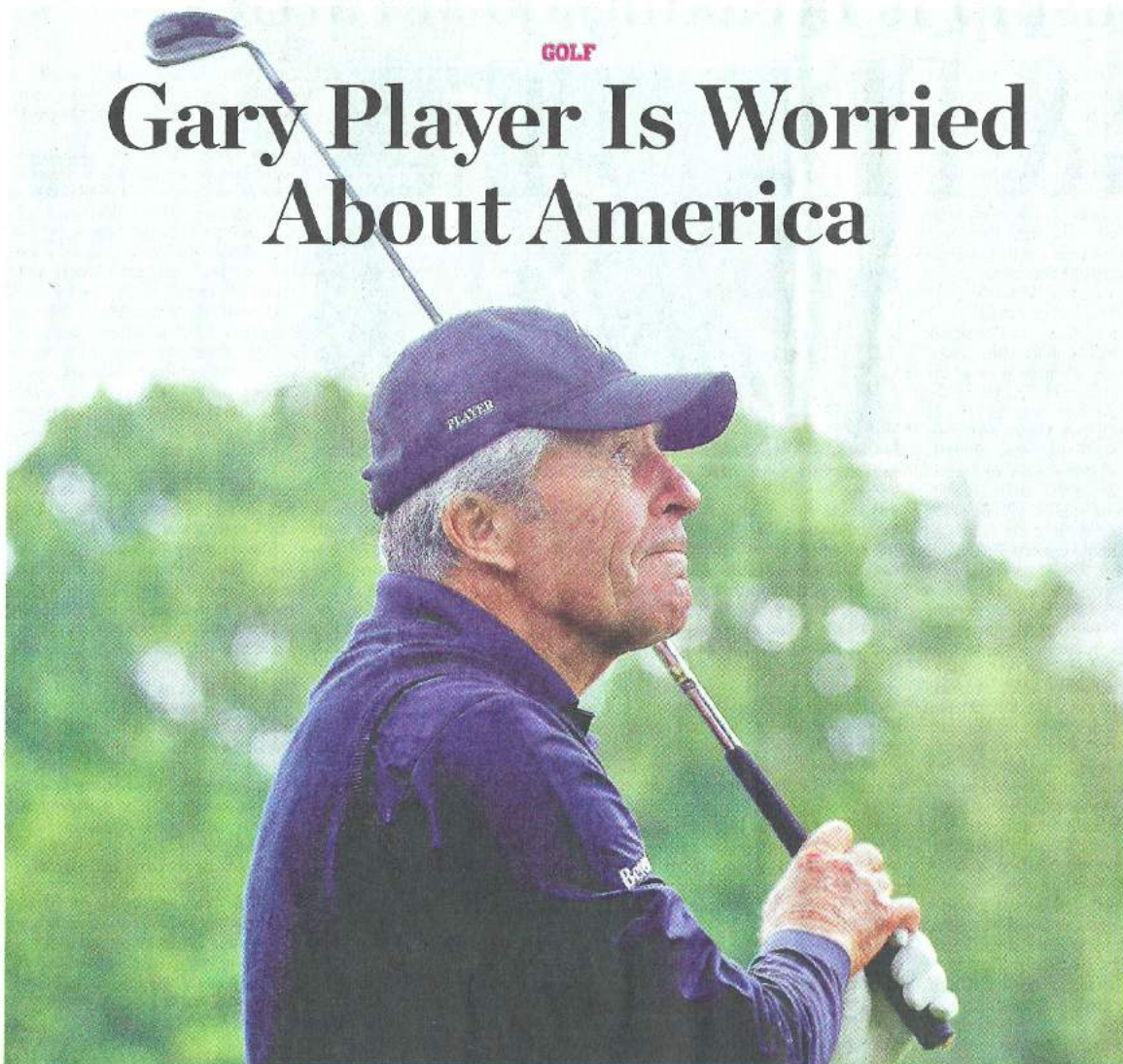
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**SPORTS**

**GOLF**  
**Gary Player Is Worried About America**



At 81 years old, Player has seen the power of sports to effect social change but he believes protests shouldn't involve the national anthem.

BY BRIAN COSTA

**"THE REST OF THE WORLD** is laughing at you," Gary Player said, and he was only getting started.

The nine-time major champion was sitting on a bench at the driving range at Chelsea Piers, where Manhattan meets the Hudson River, late Thursday afternoon. A few hours earlier, he had sat alongside former presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama to watch the opening tee shots of the Presidents Cup.

Now, still playing at 81 years old, he was taking a break from hitting balls. But golf was not foremost on his mind. More than anything, he wanted to talk about America, the closest thing to home for him outside his native South Africa.

"I pass by the great Statue of Liberty on a ferry today, and I say, 'The French gave it to you for a reason: freedom of speech and respect,'" he said. "And I see that dying. I see it dying."

This was not the kind of conversation people in the golf world like to have, at least in public. In the wake of President Donald Trump's spat with the NFL over demonstrations during the national anthem, coupled with his spat with the NBA's Golden State Warriors, most notable golfers avoided



T-S: JULIAN HERBERT/GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; CHRIS CONDON/PGA TOUR/GETTY IMAGES

saying anything that could offend anyone. Tiger Woods said he hoped that "things can be healed." When the national anthem was played Thursday before the start of competition, the players stood at atten-

tion—to absolutely no one's surprise. Their collective decision was so widely expected not because golf is a conservative sport, which it is by and large, but because its leading figures for so long have shielded

away from making statements of any sort that make its fans uncomfortable.

In this regard, the perpetually-outspoken Player has always been an outlier. And lately, he said, he fears there is even less room for individual expression in sports.

"There's only freedom of speech if it's politically correct," he said. "If you say the wrong thing today, your career is ruined. The things America stood for when I first came here are gradually vanishing."

Player joined the PGA Tour in 1957. He went on to become an all-time great golfer, a fitness evangelist and the first truly international golfer. From his earliest days as a professional, he traveled the world to play in tournaments. Now, still constantly on the move for various business and charitable ventures, he says he has traveled more miles than any human in history.

But his life has also been shaped by racial strife and how he responded to it. When he was younger, he made statements in support of the apartheid government in South Africa, which he said were the result of him being "brainwashed" growing up. He became a target of anti-apartheid demonstrators in the U.S., who frequently heckled him at tournaments.

At the 1969 PGA Championship, which he lost by one stroke, he said demonstrators threw ice in his face and threw a phone book at him during his backswing.

"These guys haven't got to deal with a quarter of what I dealt with," he said, referring to today's athletes.

Player later lobbied the South African government to allow Lee Elder, a black American golfer, to play in the 1971 South African PGA Championship, making it the first racially integrated event in the country's history. He visited Nelson Mandela in prison, kissing his feet upon meeting him, and went on to become a favorite of the iconic leader.

Writing about Player in an essay for Golf Digest in 2000, Mandela wrote, "Few men in our country's history did as much to enact political changes for the better."

Player has seen the power of sports to effect social change, but said protesting during any country's national anthem is misguided at best.

"I am a big believer that you should demonstrate for your causes, but the flag and the anthem are ours—everybody's," Player said. "Demonstrate against your cause, against that particular cause. People get confused—why are they demonstrating?"

That stance was echoed earlier in the week by Davis Love III, an assistant U.S. captain at the Presidents Cup, where the Americans built an early lead Friday as they sought to win for the seventh time in a row. Love said NFL players chose the wrong time to protest. "I think President Trump is right," Love said on Golf Channel, adding that anyone who wants to protest can send a letter to his or her member of Congress.

Player said he is most baffled by public antipathy toward Trump in general.

"You have a man who is a duly elected president of America and I hear a man on television saying we will never recognize him as president. I can't comprehend it," Player said. "The lack of respect."

Trump enjoys a closer relationship with golf than with any other sport. In addition to owning a portfolio of 18 golf clubs, the president has played casual rounds with prominent golfers including Woods, Rory McIlroy, Ernie Els and Lexi Thompson since the election. But Player said his message was less about politics than about unity.

"I hear from people all the time who can't believe what they see on television," he said. "They can't believe that Americans are condemning their own country." He added, "Anybody who lives in this country should kiss the ground every day."