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# To Kill Hummingbird

## What happened to The International?

By Kaye W. Kessler

**I**F TIGER WOODS WAS THE ONLY HUMAN AT CASTLE Pines Golf Club and launched one of his patented thunder-clap drives, would anybody hear it?

If Kevin Sutherland aced the unthinkable 16th hole at Castle Pines in front of 21,000 fans and Tiger Woods wasn't in the field, would anybody care?

If you answered "yes" and "no," you hit the strange state of pro golf today smack on the sweet spot. Tiger has a headlock on the golf world today, remaining an indomitable fixation in the minds of every fan whether he's in the tournament or not, whether the fan is attending the tournament or not.

Deeply disappointed Jack Vickers, who last month told PGA Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem and the whole PGA Tour community to kiss his International tournament goodbye, refused to be vindictive or acrimonious for pulling the plug on the tournament after 21 mostly brilliant years at his splendid Castle Pines Golf Club. He was far too tactful and discreet to blame Woods. Rather he cited a plethora of other reasons, all indirectly valid. They included having his tournament dates jerked around by the Tour, steadily declining TV ratings, an inability at the last minute to land a long-term corporate sponsor, and a staunchly proud refusal to stage a tournament that did not measure up to the very best.

So what killed The International? Who shot the colorful hummingbirds that were the classy logo for Castle Pines Golf Club and the

tournament? Who, indeed, is to blame? What does The International's demise presage for the future of professional golf?

The International isn't the only PGA Tour event to bite the dust as a result of Finchem's new FedEx Cup restructuring. The Western Open, the second-oldest tournament and one many wiser heads figured should always have been a major, has been booted out of its Chicago roots. The 84 Lumber is history as are the Booz Allen and the old Kemper events in Washington, though a dandy little double-dealing disco has returned golf to the nation's capital, possibly at The International's expense.

Blame exploded like six handfuls of grenades:

- One wise head called it the TDS (Tiger Deficiency Syndrome): the World's No. 1 scorning The International (and so many others) since his only two appearances at Castle Pines in 1998 and 1999;
- TV ratings that had gone to hell here and everywhere else Tiger doesn't play;
- Failed last-ditch efforts to attract sponsors to support an \$8 million package;
- Impracticable new dates offered to The International;
- A power struggle between two obdurate duelists—the ever-smiling, ever-grinding Vickers and the ever-grimacing Finchem—that scrambled the eggs so nobody could even make an omelet of things;
- All of the above.

It doesn't require an Einstein or a Steinberg to tell you Tiger Woods

runs the PGA Tour today. You have Tiger and you have a smash package—the Tiger Tour. You don't have Tiger, and you have disturbing TV ratings, yawning fans, and a disgusted, fleeing corporate sponsor—unless you juice the joint with a celebrity sideshow of Bill Murrays and Charles Barkleys.

As one veteran observer put it so perfectly, “There is no arguing: Tiger is the Tour today. He is not just the power behind the throne; he sits on and owns the throne. Finchem is commissioner, but Tiger is the czar, the dic-

it.” Again being fair, Vickers conceded that Finchem did bring two sponsors with big bucks to The International—Ford Motor Co. being one—during early sparring. But the fit was flawed. Possibly because of the lack of a Tiger guarantee.

There have been many sticky issues between Vickers and Finchem during the years, but had Jack known when the two made the public announcement of their annulment what had become a key part of the Tiger/Finchem/D.C. marriage, he might

class. He smiled wryly and weakly as his mind sifted through the wreckage of what had been a dream come vigorously and vitally alive for nearly a quarter of a century.

The autopsy on The International's demise is inconclusive. One cold truth is that Commissioner Finchem's power-posturing to restructure the Tour and regain control with his season-ending FedEx Cup shenanigans “snookered” Vickers.

It is a fact that Finchem, conceding Denver to be a “fine market,” offered Vickers a Sep-

## The International went belly-up, ironically hung out to dry and fade away by its own standard of excellence, by raising the bar above elegance.

tator like nobody before—not Arnold Palmer, not Jack Nicklaus. There is the Tiger Tour, and there is the Other Tour. TV revels in the first, and begrudges the second.

Still, Vickers refuses to blame Tiger for his tournament's collapse. One of the most benevolent sportsmen the state of Colorado and the game of golf has ever known, Vickers insisted “my decision (to pull out) was purely for good economic reasons, and I intended to protect my (Castle Pines) membership above all else. Tiger Woods in no way was the reason. He'd been to our tournament twice; he is the very best today without question. He's a gentleman at all times. It is ridiculous to say or hint that we blamed him.” Later Jack conceded, “If we had two or three more Tigers out there, we'd all be in better shape.”

Politically correct, even if he spoke with veiled feelings, Vickers was magnanimous in the face of glowing red flags as he said all the right things about Woods. Curious events, however, have darkened the skies over Castle Pines like no mid-August weather rumble.

Too soon after Vickers folded The International tent, Finchem announced a new PGA Tour event would replace The International: a Washington, D.C., event July 2-8, with the Tiger Woods Foundation serving as host and primary charitable benefactor and with “a very strong title sponsor” (probably AT&T).

Was this ticket from Tiger in Tim's pocket when he met with Vickers Feb. 7 in Denver to perform last rites on the hummingbirds?

Being righteous to the core, if not naive, Vickers shrugged and said, “Ooh, I doubt

have drop-kicked Tim back to Ponte Vedra with a TNT tin can on his tail. Finchem granted the Washington event “invitational” privileges, reducing the field to about 100 players from the tour's normal full field of 144-plus. Vickers had lobbied Finchem for precisely this arrangement for 15 years in an attempt to avoid the troublesome weather stoppages and next-day round finishes. Can you feel Jack's wrath?

Pointing fingers at Tiger for re-arranging the PGA Tour in his image and putting “non-Tiger events” in jeopardy, if not in the dumpster, may be right-on. But it's difficult to chastise Tiger for protecting and expanding his empire. He loved the idea of returning to a massive metro Washington audience of his fans. He despised the Tour's loss of the Western Open because Chicago has an even greater collection of admirers. And he must not have had too much affection for walking Castle Pines' tough terrain, its altitude and its tournament attitude. Tiger momentarily is about to own more oil wells than Vickers ever dreamed as part of the \$25 million to \$45 million package for designing a course on golf's all-time largest sand bunker in Dubai.

If Tiger is dissed for this or any other random acts, he cares not. He's bubble-wrapped with a hired babblehead in IMG flack Mark Steinberg to explain how unfair any criticism might be. Vickers has no such buffer. While The International's perplexing and pitiful fall from glory continues to cast a sorry pall over Denver, the 81-year-old founder and president of both the club and the tournament cloaked his disappointment and anger with

tember FedEx Cup (aka FedUp Cup) spot. Jack spurned it, figuring it suicidal to put golf up against the Denver Broncos, baseball's budding playoffs and college football, which would throw The International's TV ratings to the winds. In hindsight, he might wish he'd taken a shot at it for one year.

Vickers earlier asked for but did not receive a World Golf Championships spot, which he obviously hoped would bring brighter odds of caging the Tiger. “Quite simply, we were frustrated over that because we didn't think we got a fair shot at it,” Vickers said.

As those two carrots shriveled, Vickers then reluctantly accepted the Western's vacated July 4th Tour spot. Misguided thinking indicated Tiger liked the July 4 week on Tour when reality revealed that Tiger revered the time-honored Western Open and was wild about having a metropolis of Chicago's magnitude as the stage for his talents. Vickers and his people quickly learned the new dates were disastrous for European and other foreign players outside of Australia and Asia, who were committed to stay in Europe for key tournaments of their own leading to the British Open. In the clash of egos, time grew short and sponsors scarce.

Vickers saw the handwriting on the wall. His tournament with its marvelous international flavor and appeal would suffer. TV ratings would falter even more than ever, and they already were in a heap of hurt.

Knowing he could not maintain the high standard of excellence The International long had been famous for, he reluctantly shut

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## To Kill a Hummingbird

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down the event that was his dream. "If I can't put on the best damn tournament possible, then I won't put one on at all," he vowed.

There's little question the demise of The International left a sinking feeling in the pits of a multitude of Coloradoans' stomachs. Sympathies have also come from a plethora of Tour players, with more than 30 sending regrets and condolences to Vickers. And if PGA Tour players ever took a hard look in the mirror, they might not be feeling so hot either. The Tour has not shriveled, and perhaps it should. But it's beginning to squirm in its boots at the frightening reality of staging far too many tournaments, being over-televised and under-financed.

Therein may rest the reason The International went belly-up, ironically hung out to dry and fade away by its own standard of excellence. The fact is, The International very well could be a large reason Tour players today are as pampered and spoiled as badly as NBA and NFL players. They are coddled so much at every Tour stop that they disdain forming allegiances, and it was The International that raised the bar above elegance.

There's no denying that in 1986 The International was more than a breath of fresh air for the Tour. Vickers provided an event that was more than first-class. The International set the bar so spectacularly high that other PGA events began to follow the lead with incredible perks for players. Players have voted the Castle Pines locker room and its myriad amenities best on Tour. From year one the players were treated beyond royally: mountain trips for the families, trout-fishing junkets, theater, movies and musical shows. Forget the milk shakes.

Curiously, one of The International's most vocal dissenters was two-time winner and PGA Tour policy-board member Davis Love III, who scoffed at the TDS theory but claimed lack of sponsors was the problem, noting "there were sponsors who would have come on, but they didn't want to be in Denver." Love saluted Vickers' penchant for perfection but added, "He may have been better-served with a different format or a different course."

A different format would have meant going back to the 72-hole stroke play that is used in 45 of the other 46 tournaments, which Vickers determined the Tour did not need when he brought the modified Stabelford system into play. A different course? Love did admit Vickers "pushed every tournament on tour to do a better job .... And then they one-upped you on everything."

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Vickers did confide later that International organizers had given serious thought to abandoning the event's unique, if curious, Stableford scoring in favor of stroke play.

Inadvertently, Love may have touched on part of the solution. If Vickers and The International pushed other tournaments to excel, do it better, Woods has done much the same to the player level. The problem is that today's U.S. players are complacent, don't have the motivation or even reason to try to climb up to Woods' level. They are too content to concede Tiger first every time he tees it up, and then shoot for the ridiculously high second-to-20th-place money, to hell with the trophy. Except for the hungrier foreign players—winners, not coincidentally, of five of the last six Ryder Cups—nobody wants to work hard enough to get a piece of Tiger. When Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus ruled golf, players like Tom Watson, Lee Trevino, Tom Weiskopf and Johnny Miller would give everything except their first born for just a shot at them. Nicklaus himself has said there is not enough tiger in the tanks of other golfers today; they're far too content.

Miller, it should be recalled, was an early slacker who once said, "What the heck is so high and mighty about major tournaments? I get as much pleasure out of winning any Tour event as I do winning a major." That was before Miller won his first major. Suddenly Johnny became a terror, if not a tiger, in search of majors.

Vickers, among many, long has insisted, "There is too much golf on television." This from the only man with the clout to structure his own TV contract. (The Masters is not deemed a Tour event, even though its money counts and spends.)

Arnold Palmer years ago warned the PGA Tour that if it does not pare down to 20 tournaments for the top qualifiers, it will shoot itself in the foot. Nicklaus has echoed that sentiment.

Maybe deep in his scheming mind Finchem is trying to trim the Tour to manageable numbers, numbers attractive to television, sponsors and players who only care to play 16 or 17 events in the United States to complement the riches they can accrue from appearance money to play abroad.

Recall the words of Tommy Bolt, who once noted "the biggest liar in the world is the golfer who claims he plays the game for exercise." Tommy might have added "and the sponsor who puts up \$5 million for the good of the game."

So what now? Vickers is frustrated, disappointed and maybe weary, but he is forever

feisty and concedes nothing. He is true to his club, his members, and his dedication to golf and big-time excellence. It's a matter of the heart for Vickers—and then some. Staunchly, maybe stubbornly, he stuck to his guns, fought to the distasteful end to protect his dream. Remarkably high-principled, the former oil baron unfortunately started something with delicious international intrigue that would flash, flare and then flounder.

He has been there before, battling fiercely but futilely to keep his National Hockey League team in Denver, only to sell it and ship it off to New Jersey when city-powers-that-be failed to put their shoulders to the wheel.

Heartsick as he was over the death of his tournament, and staunch in his conviction that the Tour needs a drastic schedule reduction, Vickers, nonetheless, turned the other cheek. Maybe unrealistically, he told reporters at the funereal announcement of The International's final curtain, "Hopefully this is not the end.... When time and conditions are right, I think we'll be back here."

Possibly, but highly unlikely, with the PGA Tour. Even though both men said all the right things at the bitter end, the Vickers and Finchem relationship was hardly rosy.

During early, scrappier days when the Tour was messing with International dates, Vickers initiated strong talks/bids for both a U.S. Open and a Ryder Cup event and was ready to tell the PGA Tour what it could do with The International.

Last year, when negotiations weren't going swimmingly, Vickers crossed Finchem's eyes and buttoned his lips with a proposal of \$20 million tournament at Castle Pines with a \$10 million first prize. And Vickers had the financial backing to pull it off.

A U.S. Open now? Unlikely, without great changes. The Open is booked through 2013. The Ryder Cup is contracted through 2020. The PGA's next opening is 2014. But the PGA Senior of 2009 with a Memorial Day date is sorely searching for a site.

The very rabid golf fans throughout Denver and Colorado felt bad for losing The International. Vickers felt bad for his legion of volunteers, his long-standing employees and his membership. But there's still a twinkle in Vickers' eyes and fight in his heart that just possibly could embrace the PGA. And wouldn't that frost Finchem's eyebrows. **AC**

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## RTJ

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the bigger kind you see at Crested Butte to smaller, more intricate bunkering and roll-offs and spill-offs around the green. I learned from him—as I do from all the architects I've mentioned. I like their work. And I go out of my way to play their work. But they don't play my work or other people's work. That's true of Nicklaus and Fazio in particular. I don't know why; they just don't. It's silly not to. We're privileged people in this world, so we should be grateful and happy that we all can do this.

### **What do you think of your brother Rees' courses?**

He has done some very good work. I find that he tilts planes on the greens over and over throughout the course. After a while you know what you're getting.

### **Could you ever do a course with him?**

No. Not because I haven't tried. I made the offer many times, as did my father. And he just rejected it. He's a very insular person. I am open. I collaborated with my father near the end of his life. He was my mentor, and in his old age, after my mother passed away, and he needed help, I was invited back. My brother was invited back, too, but he chose not to be helpful and do something. At the time my father did the Alabama trail, although I didn't participate in the design, I participated in the organization and the construction and supported the effort. That was for me an emotionally very beautiful moment, and we were very close because of that. So when he passed away, although I missed him, I'd already done my grieving and expected it. He was 93.

### **How often do you visit a project?**

I'm a hands-on architect. If I have to come out 10 times, I come out 10 times. It's like the brain surgeon says: It's not how much time I spend; it's knowing where to cut.

### **What's your handicap now?**

About a 10. I have a bad hip. I just can't hit as far. And because I'm making the courses longer, this is not a great equation.

### **What do you think about technology's impact on course length?**

Any architect who's worthy of the profession will adjust to the era in which he's working. I don't think it's a good trend to take esteemed, classic courses and lengthen them just to do that. They're lengthening Pine Valley. I'm a member and I'm not pleased. I think it was time to lengthen the 18th hole. But lengthening the par threes makes no sense. When a golf course or golf hole is deemed worthy of greatness for a