

THE COURAGE TO LEAVE



What the World Cup, Byron Nelson and a quiet Texas ranch might teach us about knowing when enough is enough.

Every four years or so, an odd but quite predictable phenomenon takes place.

It does not concern politics. It is not that we get to enjoy the 29th of February. Nor, for that matter, is it the organisation of the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

The phenomenon I am thinking about comes, like a free gift, with the World Cup.

As teams begin to go home, departures gather pace. Managers resign. Others are dismissed. Players announce the end of their international careers. Senior officials accept responsibility and step aside.

The circumstances are different, and that matters. Leaving is not just one thing.

It can represent failure, accountability, exhaustion, clarity, relief or simply the natural closing of a cycle.

Sport is full of these moments. World championships, regional competitions and Olympic cycles create obvious points at which athletes, coaches and administrators reconsider what comes next.

But major events merely make visible something that happens throughout life.

At some point, most of us ask whether we should continue.

Sometimes the answer arrives because circumstances have already decided for us. Injury may decide. Illness may decide. Age may decide. A contract may not be renewed. Form deserts us.

Results may deteriorate until the world makes the decision on our behalf.

That is one kind of ending.

The more difficult question comes when the door remains open.

When we are still wanted.

When we can still win.

When the door stays open

There is something strangely reassuring about a decision being taken out of our hands.

We may not like it. We may fight against it. We may even believe the decision to be wrong.

But at least the ambiguity has gone.

The door has closed.

The harder moment comes when none of that happens. There may still be money to earn, status to protect and records to chase. There may be people around you who cannot understand why you would even consider leaving.

Why stop now?

Why not one more year?

Why not one more attempt?

Being able to continue can easily become its own argument for continuing.

Perhaps that is why transition interests me.

Not simply the act of stopping, but the moment at which somebody decides that being able to continue is not, by itself, a good enough reason to do so.

Golf is different

The World Cup departures made me think about the sport in which I am most embedded.

Golf has its share of retirements, but the game is unusual. There is often no obvious moment at which a player must stop.

Careers stretch.

A player may stop winning majors but remain on the main tour. Later there may be senior golf, invitations, ceremonial roles, occasional starts and other ways of staying connected with the game that once defined them.

Golf offers a softer descent from the summit.

The transition does not have to be abrupt, which may also make the decision more difficult.

There is always another possibility.

Another event.

Another season.

Another reason to stay.

Which is why the story of Byron Nelson is so difficult to ignore.

The man who won almost everything and walked away

In 1945, Byron Nelson produced one of the most extraordinary seasons golf has seen.

He won 18 tournaments. Eleven came consecutively. He finished second seven times.

The numbers are difficult to comprehend.

Historical context matters, of course. It always does. Sport changes. Competition changes. Equipment changes. The circumstances in which one generation performs cannot be laid perfectly over another.

But context should not become a way of avoiding the achievement.

Nelson still had to stand over every shot. He still had to beat the players who were there. He still had to keep winning after the story had changed from whether he might win to whether anybody could stop him.

There is pressure in trying to win.

There must be another kind of pressure in being expected to.

Nelson won another six times in 1946. He remained one of the finest golfers in the world.

Then came the part I find fascinating.

At 34, he effectively walked away from full-time tournament golf.

Not because he could no longer compete.

He left while he could still win.

So why did he go?

Nelson had a clear ambition to own land in Texas and live a quieter life. Tournament golf was part of the route that could take him there.

That distinction matters.

It is far too easy to assume that the purpose of success is more success.

Win once, then win again.

Make money, then make more.

Reach number one, then stay number one.

Become famous, then protect the fame.

The reward for reaching the summit of our profession is often wrapped in a new plan for how to remain there.

Nelson seems to have viewed matters differently.

He appears to have connected prize money with the life he wanted. I wish I could have spoken with him because I would have liked to ask what, exactly, he saw when he entered a tournament or stood over an important putt.

Did he see another trophy?

Or did he see land?

A herd of cattle?

Equipment?

The practical building blocks of a ranch?

Of course, golf was not meaningless to him. Quite the opposite.

But perhaps golf had a purpose beyond winning.

And once that purpose had been substantially fulfilled, the calculation changed.

Another victory may simply have mattered less.

Tournament golf had also begun to take a toll.

Accounts of Nelson's life describe serious stomach problems associated with the pressure of competition. The circuit had become increasingly difficult, and he wanted the quieter life he had imagined in Texas.

From a distance, dominance looks enjoyable.

We imagine confidence feeding confidence. We assume that the person who keeps winning must be having the time of his life.

Perhaps.

But winning changes the pressure.

At first the question is whether you can win. Later it may become whether you are about to stop winning.

Every tournament carries the possibility that something is ending.

Nelson's extraordinary run changed his place in the game. It may also have changed his relationship with competition.

And this is where his story begins to connect with the departures we see around a World Cup.

Not because the circumstances are identical. They are not.

But because the same question may sit somewhere beneath them.

The reason is not always failure.

We understand people leaving when things go badly.

Society has a language for that.

Failure. Accountability. Time for change. A fresh start.

We are less comfortable when people leave while things are going well. Then we start looking for the hidden problem.

Why not another year?

Why not another major?

Why not another record?

Why not earn more?

The assumption seems to be that continuing requires no explanation, while leaving does.

Perhaps we have that backwards.

Nelson was not alone.

Roger Bannister retired from competitive athletics at 25 after becoming the first man to run a mile in under four minutes. Ash Barty left professional tennis at 25 while world number one. Nico Rosberg retired after winning the Formula One World Championship.

The circumstances were different and the comparisons should not be stretched too far.

But each challenged the idea that reaching the top creates an obligation to stay there.

There is security in remaining the person everybody already knows you to be.

That security is easy to underestimate.

Walk away from one world and you may enter another in which your previous achievements carry little weight. You may no longer be the champion, the expert, the person whose name opens the door.

You may simply be new.

Leaving requires a willingness to discover whether there is another version of you.

Then there are those who stay

Of course, there is no moral superiority in leaving.

Some people continue because the work still energises them. They adapt. Their objectives change. Winning becomes mentoring. Competition becomes craft.

The person who once relied on physical superiority learns to survive through experience.

There is courage in continuing too.

The point is not that leaving is brave and staying is weak. The point is that each requires honesty.

Are you still there because you want to be?

Or because you do not know who you would be without it?

Golf and identity

Perhaps golfers understand this better than most.

The game can become deeply embedded in identity.

We do not simply say that somebody plays golf. We say they are a golfer.

For many of the best players, this begins young. Practice, travel, competition and selection shape family life, friendships and education. Eventually the sport becomes a profession, but long before that it may already have become the organising principle of a life.

So what happens when it stops?

The professional tour player is an obvious example, but the same question exists much further down the game.

A club champion whose handicap rises.

A volunteer who has run the junior section for 20 years.

A golfer whose body can no longer make the movement that once felt natural.

These may look like smaller transitions from the outside.

They may not feel small to the person living through them.

We may not be Byron Nelson, but the difficulty is recognisable.

Sometimes the hardest thing to surrender is not the activity.

It is the identity attached to it.

That may be why people stay too long. Not because they still love what they are doing. Not because it continues to make them happy.

But because they cannot imagine who they might be without it.

The score does not always tell us

Sport appears to offer a simple judge.

The score.

But I am no longer convinced.

Success is rarely as objective as we pretend. One football nation may regard reaching the last 16 as a triumph, while another may see losing in the quarter-finals as failure.

A golfer may celebrate keeping a tour card. Another may regard finishing second in a major championship as an opportunity lost.

Success depends partly on what happened.

And partly on what we believed should have happened.

Byron Nelson's score told him to continue.

Everything on the outside said stay.

Something on the inside said go.

That may be the most important part of his story.

He did not wait until poor performance made the decision respectable. He did not require public failure to grant him permission.

He had an idea of another life and, crucially, seems to have recognised that it was not merely something to dream about while continuing indefinitely with the old one.

Eventually, transition requires movement.

The ranch could not remain a fantasy.

Perhaps enough is a skill

We speak often about ambition.

We admire hunger and celebrate those who keep going. We tell stories about persistence, resilience and the refusal to accept limits.

There is value in all of that.

But perhaps there is another skill that receives less attention.

Knowing what enough looks like.

Enough money.

Enough recognition.

Enough victories.

Enough sacrifice.

Enough proof.

Nelson appears to have known.

That does not mean the decision was easy. His physical reaction to pressure suggests otherwise. Nor did he abandon golf. He continued to play selectively and remained connected to the game.

But full-time tournament golf no longer owned him.

He had somewhere else to go.

A quieter question

As the World Cup continues, there will be more departures.

Some will be forced. Others voluntary. A few may have been decided long before the final match was played.

The language will be familiar. A new cycle. Fresh leadership. Responsibility. Family. Exhaustion. The next generation.

But somewhere among those announcements sits a quieter question that applies far beyond football, golf or sport.

How do we know when it is time to leave?

Perhaps the answer is not always found in failure.

Perhaps we should pay more attention to those who leave while still successful and while the familiar life remains available.

Byron Nelson was 34.

He could still win.

Then he walked away from the full-time tour and went home to Texas.

The world may have wondered why.

Perhaps Nelson simply knew where he wanted to be next.

Tony Bennett

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Note: I visited the Byron Nelson PGA TOUR event in April 2024. Whilst there I wanted to learn more about the man and his early retirement.