GOLF:
An ancient game in modern times

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Some of you, I'm sure, have heard the story about the avid golfer who assured his wife he could get in nine holes on a beautiful Saturday morning and return well in advance of his mother-in-law's birthday party at noon.

True to his word, he finished his round around 10 and was dutifully en route home when he encountered a beautiful blonde standing forlornly beside the road next to her disabled Porsche. Noticing the flat tire, he chivalrously stopped to help.

The upshot was he finally arrived home three hours later, having missed his mother-in-law's birthday luncheon, to face the wrath of his enraged spouse. Full of guilt and remorse, he decided to confess and let the chips fall where they may.

He told his wife about stopping to help the lady in distress. While changing the tire, he said, his clothes had become drenched in sweat and his hands and arms covered in grease and grime. The grateful blonde, who lived nearby, said the least she could do was allow him to follow her home and use her bathroom to clean and refresh himself. He agreed and, while he was partaking of her facilities, she was changing into something more comfortable and mixing him a stiff drink. One thing led to another, and they spent the next couple of hours making mad, passionate love.

At that point in his confession, the repentant husband was on his hands and knees trying to save his marriage. He begged his wife's forgiveness for succumbing to the weakness of the flesh. When he looked up into her eyes, however, he saw only mockery and incredulity.

``You don't expect me to believe that cockamamie story,'' she responded. ``You played the other nine holes, didn't you?''

Yes, for its serious devotees, golf is an addiction, not unlike heroin and cocaine. And it's spreading just as rapidly. Wives who aren't hooked on golf themselves jealously recognize its symptoms, that it increasingly diverts their husbands' time, money and attention away from them. They reflexively learn to hate the game. So do many others who don't play and, hence, don't understand the sport. Non-golfers react to golf like today's non-smokers react to smokers -- with scorn and ridicule. Comedian George Carlin, for instance, describes golf as about as exciting as watching flies fornicate.

And the criticism has always been thus. The first recorded reference to the ancient game, in 1457, was a denunciation. King James II of Scotland signed an edict banning the sport. The King believed that golf

was detracting attention away from the important task of archery practice, which was deemed necessary for the forthcoming wars with the English. A century later, it was the monarch, Mary Queen of Scots, who was criticized for playing golf. Her enemies cited that she had been ``playing golf in the fields by Seton'' when she should have been mourning the death of her husband Darnley. Played originally by sheepherders on the hilly grasslands along the Scottish coast and later on American farms, the game of golf was long ago dubbed by its detractors as ``pasture pool.'' And I believe it was the humorist Mark Twain who described golf as ``a good walk spoiled.''

I must confess I was once among golf's outspoken critics. Having tried with minimal success to hack my way around a course a couple of times in my youth as a diversion from baseball, tennis, basketball, running and other sports considered to be more manly, I dismissed golf as a silly, expensive, impossible game with no redeeming aerobic value. Besides, it tended to turn my temper on and my blood pressure up. I could, and too frequently did, throw my club farther than I could hit the ball. It was then that my dad, who was playing golf a lot at the time, gave me my first golf tip: ``You're standing too close to the ball ... after you hit it.''

Dad actually watched this boring pastime on television. Wasn't it comedian George Lee who said, ``You know you're getting old when you watch golf on TV and enjoy it?'' All the pro golfers, in the relatively new era of color television, were wearing bell-bottomed, double-knit polyester pants of such muted colors as fire-engine red, lime green and baby-bottom pink -- many replete with mixed plaids and checks of the same hues. A pimp would be proud, I thought.

My negative attitude on golf was rudely adjusted in 1986 when my excercise-abused knees blew out, and I was forced to undergo double arthroscopic surgery. I quickly realized that golf was the only competitive sport left open to me. Upon taking up the game seriously at age 40, I also quickly realized what a challenge it was. I'm no great athlete, but I had always been able to chew gum and walk at the same time. Never before had I encountered a sport at which I couldn't attain an acceptable degree of competency by simple repetition. When it came to golf, the harder I tried the worse I got. In desperation, I turned to the then assistant sports editor at my newspaper -- a 2-handicapper -- for a lesson. After watching me spend a lunch hour hitting my usual assortment of bulldozers, shanks and worm-burners, he shrugged his shoulders and bluntly asked if I had considered taking up tennis. To my

ultimate credit or stupidity, his assessment of my game only strengthened my resolve to persevere. What choice did I have if I wanted to spend the rest of life devoid of any participation sport?

Golf appears to be the easiest of ball sports to master. After all, that little white -- or optic green or orange or, if you dare, pink -- 1.62-ounce and 1.68-inch-round ball is just sitting immobile on the ground or, even better in many cases, high on a wooden or plastic tee waiting for you to hit it. It's not coming at you at 90 mph and, when you touch it, there is no 300-pound behemoth waiting to knock your block off.

Only a few swings are required, however, to convince yourself just how difficult it is not just to hit a golf ball but to make the solid contact necessary to consistently get it airborne, to go a reasonable distance and to fly in the direction you intend. Struck golf balls do strange things. I once saw a ball struck with mean intent by one lady catch on the blade of her club and end up 10 feet behind her. It sounds impossible, but one of my favorite golf partners, who shall remain nameless, managed to strike himself in the face with a ball.

Swinging a golf club has correctly been described as an unnatural act. Your hands and arms move on a vertical plane while the rest of your body moves on a horizontal plane. In other words, you have to twist yourself into a pretzel. Golf also is a game of opposites. If you want the ball to go high, you hit down on it. If you want to hit right, you aim left and vice versa. Bob Hope said it best, ``If you watch a game, it's fun; if you play it, it's recreation; if you work at it, it's golf.''

And the harder you work, the more frustrated you become. I spent hours on the range hitting buckets of practice balls in preparation for my first non-team tournament and thought I was ready. So angered and embarrassed was I at my play that after a particularly bad shot on the second hole of the second day, I stormed off the course in shame, drove home in an escalating state of depression and, though a grown man, cried like a baby. And I bet I wasn't the first golfer to do so.

It is out of such frustration that the multibillion-dollar golf instruction industry was born. One can take personal golf lessons with a teaching pro, attend golf schools and buy an endless variety of instructional books, magazines and videos. Expensive swing gurus are even hired on a contingency basis by touring professionals, ones you would expect to need help the least.

The problem with golf instruction, unlike that in other sports, is that there is no real consensus among the experts on the fundamentals.

Professional opinions not only vary but freqently are contradictory. For instance, one teacher may promote a handsy, upright swing, while another insists on a flat swing with no hand action at all. And experts have debated for decades whether the golf swing is correctly controlled by the left side or right side of the body. Or whether the desired ball flight is a fade, a draw or perfectly straight.

The late newspaper columnist and author Lewis Grizzard, an avid golfer himself, describes the confusion at a typical golf lesson. ``Now, first of all, just take a few swings without hitting the ball,'' the pro says.

``Hell, I've already mastered that shot,'' the pupil responds. ``I'm paying you to teach me how to hit it.''

Writing for ``Golf in America,'' John Andrisani concludes that various golf experts over the centuries all agree on only eight basic fundamentals:

> (1) Hold the club with a neutral grip, the back of the left hand square to the target, right palm parallel to the left;
> (2) Set up square to the ball, with feet, knees, hips and shoulders parallel to an imaginary line extending from ball to target and with the body weight balanced equally between the ball and heel of each foot;
> (3) Use a smooth, one-piece takeway by sweeping the club low to the ground for the first foot or two of the swing;
> (4) Keep the head relatively still and the left arm relatively straight as the wrists cock naturally, swinging the club upward, while rotating the hips 45 degrees and the shoulders 90 degrees;
> (5) Arrive at a square position at the top of the swing, the club shaft parallel to the target line;
> (6) Lead with the lower body on the downswing;
> (7) Swing through the ball, not at it; and
> (8) Finish facing slightly left of the target.

Nothing to it, right?

With all this paralysis by analysis, it's not surprising that Stewart Maiden, teacher of Bobby Jones, arguably the best golfer who ever lived, believed that too many maxims only confused students. He stressed simplicity instead.

If you think golf instruction has gotten technical, consider the evolution of equipment. The original Scottish shepherds were content with a single, curved hickory stick with which to hit a wound leather ball over, under and through the sand dunes, sheep dung, shore grasses and other obstacles their natural, unspoiled environment produced. Even as the game developed -- and players learned that a roughened ball filled with feathers or composed of hardened gutta-percha resin flew farther, higher, and straighter than one with a smooth surface -- there were still few enough golf clubs in a bag to give them names rather than numbers. The 1-wood has always been called the driver. But the 2-wood was known as the brassie, the 3-wood was the spoon, the 4-wood a cleek and the 5-wood a brassie. Among the irons, the longer clubs were various forms of mashies, and the shorter, scoring clubs were niblicks.

Modern equipment is of a space-age design, material and price tag, based on the premise that if you can't develop a good golf game, maybe you can buy one. Balls vary from the three-piece model with wound rubber center and hard balata rubber cover for accuracy to the two-piece model with a solid mass inside a tough, synthetic surface for more distance and durability -- all having specialized dimpling to achieve the degree of ball flight you desire. It was the 1930s before hickory gave away to iron and finally steel as the raw material of choice for making golf clubs. Steel shafts are quickly being displaced by fiberglass, boron, graphite and other composite substances. And you seemingly can't buy a set of clubs today without getting a lecture from the sales clerk about custom fitting, perimeter weighting, flex points and lie angles. Titanium, a synthetic medal used in spacecraft because it is harder and lighter than steel, is the latest rage in clubhead design -- delivering longer and straighter shots. One golf ball on the market boasts a titanium core. It may not go any farther, but you can bet -- like all other golf equipment -- it costs more. A set of top-of-the-line golf clubs will set you back as much as $1,500 for 10 irons and up to $900 for three metal woods. A dozen golf balls can go as high as $40.

With all of this high-priced instruction and equipment available, you would think golf scores would be plummeting. Such is not the case, much to the consternation and amazement of the game's administrators. Players who can consistently break 90 on a par 72 course comprise only about 10 percent of the world's 25 million golfers. Alas, the vast majority of us golfers, despite all we buy or do, are doomed to be duffers. I agree with Lewis Grizzard's theory that God picks out only a limited

number of people at any one time and gives them what he calls ``The Secret of Golf,'' which is shooting par or better. ``I'm not certain by what process God chooses these individuals,'' Grizzard writes. ``Perhaps He does it at random. He's sitting there, dictating who will get what when they are born, and He says, `OK, Hotchkiss gets a lot of hair, Windom gets great teeth, Matthews gets no zits when he's in high school, give Shirley Patton blue eyes and a rich daddy, and give Schwarz the Secret of Golf.' So, at any time on earth, there are maybe 10,000 people God has given the Secret of Golf.''

One of the traditional criticism of golf is its elitism -- a charge that is difficult to refute, especially in America. Rich people did not invent or play the original game in Scotland; nor were they ever successful in stealing it for themselves. British royalty took up the sport early on, however, and inspired many changes -- including the use of caddies (from the French word, ``cadet'') to carry golf equipment. The first official golf society, the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers, was chartered in 1744. But the tradition of the exclusive golf club probably derives from Scotland's many Masonic chapters, which embraced the game as a group and which already were restrictive by nature.

It was two transplanted Scotsmen, both of whom were probably Masons, who are credited with bringing formal golf to America in the late 1800's, along with the elitism. John Reid and Robert Lockhart organized a club on Nov. 14, 1888, to play golf on a cow pasture across the street from Reid's home in Yonkers, N.Y. In 1892, city expansion forced the group to move its course four blocks north to a 34-acre apple orchard, prompting the members to be known forever as ``The Apple Tree Gang.'' America's first golf club relocated for the third and final time in 1894 to a hundred-acre farm outside of town, remodeled the old farmhouse into a clubhouse and became Grey Oaks country club, which survives today. Meanwhile, Shinnecock Hills in Southhampton on Long Island had organized and built a clubhouse to become the oldest permanent facility in the nation.

From those humble beginnings, golf spread quickly not only along the East Coast but all across the nation. Chicago Golf Club, for instance, is one of the five charter members of the United States Golf Association. I was prepared to report that golf came late to Hopkinsville and Christian County until I realized that the course at Hopkinsville and Country Club was constructed in 1916 _ just 24 years after ``The Apple Tree Gang.'' It would be more than 40 years, however, before there would be any significant progress on the local golfing front. In the early '60s,

prominent businessman James C. Givens developed Skyline Country Club on the former W.T. Fowler farm, the Hopkinsville club's course expanded from nine to 18 holes and a nine-hole public course was constructed at Pennyrile Forest State Resort Park in North Christian. Givens' golf development included an oddity for its day - a nine-hole public course of par-3 holes lighted for nighttime play. There was also a miniature golf course and a lighted driving range.

But golf here and across America remained pretty much a private membership affair -- except at state parks and expensive resorts -- until the golf boom of the '80s. Just how exclusive? The National Golf Club in Augusta, Ga. -- the brainchild of the retired Georgian golfing legend Bobby Jones in the late 1930's, was and is the epitome. Those who have to ask the cost of membership at Augusta National, site of the annual Masters championship, can't afford it. Only the elite of the elite, or their friends, are allowed to play at Augusta, much less join. Lewis Grizzard tells this story:

All his life, the dignified state Supreme Court justice from South Carolina had dreamed of playing a round of golf at that Southern hold of golf holies, the Augusta National. But he had never met a member or been able to wrangle an invitation from someone who did. While passing through Augusta one day, he couldn't resist the urge to at least drive by and gaze at the course _ or actually at the stately gates which lead to it.

Though he knew better, the primal pull led him to drive up to the gatekeeper. As the frowning man approached, the judge rolled down his window and said, ``I am Judge Poteet from Charleston, and I'm in town on business. Would it be possible for me to just drive down Magnolia Lane once?"

``Sorry," replied the eloquent guardian.

As he was turning around to leave, another car was turning into the driveway. Losing all 63 years of his dignity, he rolled down his window and stuck his head out as a signal for the driver to stop. He began talking fast. ``Are you a member of this marvelous club?" he prayed aloud. ``Of course," came the unamused reply.

Pressing forward, he continued, ``Sir, I am Judge Poteet of Charleston, S.C., and I have been a lifelong devotee of golf. Although I have attend the Masters golf tournament for the last 37 years, I have never had the privilege of playing this course. My life will not be complete until I've struck a golf ball inside these walls. Is there any way, sir, that you could help me?"

``Let's get out of the driveway," the member answered, and he gestured for the highly excited judge to follow him in.

He couldn't believe it. He was actually driving his car down the historic, picturesque, magnolia-shrouded lane leading toward the most beautiful and restricted golf club in the world. Could this be happening?

When they got to the parking lot, he jumped out of his car and rushed over to the member. ``I appreciate you taking a moment to consider my request, sir. I know this is completely out of order, but I would consider the opportunity to play here the crowning achievement of my life and a great personal favor."

The member gave the judge a long look, shut his car door and asked, ``Handicap?"

``Eleven, sir, though during my younger years I was a scratch golfer."

``Education?"

``Duke, undergrad, Harvard Law School -- magna cum laude."

``Athletics?"

``Duke golf team. Was medalist on the '58 Atlantic Coast Conference champion team that beat Arnold Palmer's Wake Forest team in a playoff. Also lettered in all four sports in high school."

``Military?"

``Army intelligence, Korea. Purple heart and Bronze Star."

``Community involvement?"

``State coordinator for the American Heart Association, '72 through '79, Chamber of Commerce, Lions' Club, church deacon."

``Club membership?"

"Charleston Country Club, Melrose, Pinehurst."

The member pondered briefly, then nodded to the young man from the club who had walked out to see if his assistance was needed, and said, ``Let him hit a bucket of practice balls."

Golf popularity among the masses -- at least as a spectator sport -- mushroomed after World War II with the advent of television and the emergence of Arnold Palmer -- a strong, handsome Pennsylvanian with a charismatic, all-out style of play -- as a professional star. TV and Arnie, with his army of fans, were made for each other. President Eisenhower is credited with popularizing presidential golf, ordering the construction of a putting green on the White House lawn and having his own personal cabin at Augusta National. But he certainly was not the first of the nation's Chief Executives to play. William Howard Taft, for instance, was an avid golfer. Golf even went lunar in 1971 when astronaut Alan Shephard hit

undoubtedly the longest and perhaps most famous 6-iron of all time on the gravity-free surface of the moon.

There are many theories for golf-participation boom that began in the '80s and continues to this day: higher salaries, more leisure time and increased spectator interest. But I believe that the golf boom was fueled by baby boomers like me who have gotten too old for more strenuous sports. Whatever the reason, new public, resort and residential golf courses have been sprouting up over the American landscape like so many daisies during the past decade. After the Skyline course went public in the late '60s, the opening of Western Hills municipal course in 1986 gave Hopkinsville its first top-flight, 18-hole public facility. Course construction across the country has slowed somewhat in recent years but continues unabated. New public courses opened in neighboring Todd and Trigg counties last year alone. And other courses are on the drawing board for this area.

Just as the walls of elitism around American golf have started to crumble, so have race and gender barriers. Tiger Woods of black and Asian heritage is the rising star of American golf. And many a woman, after finding she could not compete with golf for her man's attention, has joined her husband -- much to his frequent chagrin -- as a player. Katherine Peden made headlines locally when, in protest, she teed off at the Hopkinsville club during the noon hour, a time reserved for men.

So, for better or worse, no longer can a golf clubhouse be considered strictly a male domain, referred to fondly by Scotsmen as an ``Eve-less Eden'' or by Lewis Grizzard as a place where you can play gin rummy naked if you want to. That may leave Athenaeum Society as the last of the male sanctuaries.

Unfortunately, however, wives joining their husbands at the golf course has not solved marital problems associated with the game.

Charlie and Bruce, both low handicappers, were flying around the course and having a great round until they ran up behind two women playing together. Suddenly they had to wait before every shot.

``I think I'll walk up and ask them if we can play through,'' said Charlie.

``Good idea,'' replied Bruce.

Charlie walked about 50 yards towards the women, made a quick U-turn and headed back to Bruce.

``I thought you were going to ask them if we could play through,'' Bruce commented.

"I was," Charlie responded, ``but when I got close enough to see them, I realized that's my wife playing golf with my mistress."

"Are you sure? Let me go take a look," said Bruce. He walked 30 or 40 yards down the fairway, did a quick about-face, returned to Charlie and said, ``What a coincidence!"