

Why Golf?

Recently at a Christmas party, the host and hostess asked us why we love golf so much. They were non-golfers and I have to assume that they were genuinely curious as why anyone would love this sport as it is not entirely self evident.

It's almost impossible to explain to someone why you love golf because it's the sort of thing that attaches to any activity that people love. I have no idea, for example, why some people love to watch horse racing and yet we have friends who are so involved with that, including the ownership of champion racing horses, that I have no doubt that it is a fully legitimate human emotion. It is not for me to make fun of my horse racing friends but rather to rejoice that they have such passion about something. When they wrote and



told us about the wonderful things that have happened to their horses, the heated competitions and the atmosphere in the grandstands as the horses near the finishing line, I know that I'm in the presence of genuine human feelings that are much to be appreciated. Golf is like that.

To love golf it is necessary to go well beyond beating some balls at the driving range every week or so. You have to venture out onto a real golf course and meet the challenges that the designer has in store for you. But it takes quite awhile to do this. You've got to get well beyond the normal embarrassments of novice play and start seeing yourself as playing against the designer of the course. But you don't have to be a scratch player. Players at all levels who have got to the point of really looking at the course, as opposed to just mindlessly hitting the ball, will understand what I'm talking about. We are in continual competition with the designer. He challenges us at every moment and makes us consider our alternatives. Will we be courageous and try the long odds shot, or will we take the safe route even though it may add a stroke or two to our score?

The distances in golf defy normal comprehension. In golf, a very short hole would be only one hundred yards and the "par" for such a hole would be three strokes. If you can sink the ball in three strokes, you've parred the hole. You start on the tee box and put your ball on a wooden tee, all the while thinking hard about where you'd like to land the ball. Will you go directly for the hole or be concerned about avoiding the big bunker in front of the hole by hitting off to one side or the other? If you have had a chance to study the green you'll have an idea how your tee shot will roll after it lands and that also might cause you to select a target well away from the pin. So you hit the ball and it goes one hundred yards but misses the hole (not surprising). You've just casually hit a ball the length of a football field, aiming at a hole three and one half inches in diameter. You've missed the hole but now you hope for a "birdie," a two-stroke score, one under par. Your

putt is good but it misses the hole by two inches and the ball stops two feet beyond the hole. On the next putt you sink the ball for a par score but you walk away thinking about the missed birdie. On another day, you'll play this same hole and be very thankful you got a boogie, one over par, because your tee shot missed the green by twenty yards. Fortune changes with every game.

Think about a par 4 hole. A typical par 4 is about 350 yards in length. You will get just four shots to sink your ball in 3 ½ inch cup from a distance of 350 yards, or three and one half football fields. I never miss the emotional moments of this game. Whenever I have a good hole, I turn and look back to the tee to appreciate what I've done. It's very much a human triumph over the odds. If we didn't know so much about this game, we'd think it impossible.



Golf is very much a “head” game. Whether you play well or poorly is mainly dependent on what’s going on in your head. If you are preoccupied with other thoughts, you’ll play lousy golf. Golf is a demanding mistress – it wants all of your attention. When you stand over the ball, there can be no extraneous thoughts and no doubts about your skills. You visualize what the shot should be like and then execute it. In this respect, golf is no different from any other sport except for one thing. In golf, there are very pregnant pauses. There are pauses when the whole world is standing around watching your every move. But the better you get, the less this concerns you. You learn to focus on your ball as though it is the only thing that matters and once you’ve decided what to do, you initiate your swing without delay for you know that if the pause lasts too long, doubt will creep in.

There is a common saying in the world of golf about people who are having an exceptionally good round. These people are said to be “in the zone,” meaning that their minds are totally focused on the game. If you play long enough, you’ll have rounds like that and you’ll also develop great appreciation for professional golfers who manage to get “in the zone” almost every time they play.

Funnily, most golfers don’t have a favorite professional. Golf is not like other sports in that respect. The people you root for in professional matches are the people who are doing well, whomever they might be. The problem is, most professional golfers are really nice people so you can’t choose a favorite purely on the basis of personality. Instead, when someone is winning, or strongly challenging the front runner, you enjoy the moment with them, whether it is men’s or women’s golf, whether the player is an American or a foreigner and whether the player is a favorite or an underdog.

We now have lots of foreign professionals and I love them all. I can't imagine what this sport would be like without a Greg Norman, a Nick Faldo, a Nick Price, a Vijay Singh, a Gary Player or the numerous others who hail from lands across the sea. And now finally we have a Black player leading the pack in the form of Tiger Woods. Yes, there is too much hype about Tiger, but the truth is we all love him and want him to be successful, not just for a year, but for a career. I look forward to seeing what sort of golfer he will be in five, ten or fifteen years. In what other sport can you take such a long view?

Golf has long been deservedly regarded as a stuffy sport, limited mostly to the country club set. But that changed many years ago with the tremendous growth of public courses where people like me are welcome to play. Today, there are players at all income levels and, as in that wonderful USGA commercial about underprivileged kids playing golf, we are less concerned about young golfer's attire and equipment, and more concerned about the quality of their game. More and more, we hope to see Lee Trevino style players who learned the game on public golf courses. Lee has probably gotten over his aversion to the country club set, but when he first started playing professionally, he refused to change his shoes in the club house. Instead, he did it in the parking lot just like all the ordinary folks who play golf on the weekends at a public golf course.

But whoever plays this game, and whatever their background or country of origin might be, I hope they will have a never-ending reverence for the basic traditions of golf. This a game of honor and courtesy. To play it well means having the utmost respect for other golfers, whether that entails not stepping on their line when putting or being quiet when they are getting ready to hit their ball. It also means being honest about your score and your observance of the rules. The rules aren't always easy to understand, but the basic rules are the ones most frequently violated. The one basic rule of the game is that you should play your ball as it lies, no matter how bad that might be, and, believe it or not, this is the rule that I have found most pleasurable because it is this rule that makes the game what it is. With it, it's one of the most challenging games in the world; without it, any fool can score well.

So I can't really explain why golf is such a great sport. You have to play it to appreciate it.