Golf is healthy, and here's why

We try not to engage in a great deal of golf industry flag-waving here at Golf Course News because, basically, there are plenty of people to do it for us. When some media outlet takes a shot at golf, as Forbes magazine did in August, the legion golf-industry optimists come out of the woodwork. Geez, did that Forbes article get under people's skin or what! Whatever, the article in question was anything but complimentary, of course. However, it's not my opinion that anyone on the Forbes staff owes the golf industry an apology. In fact, we owe Steve and the Gang a debt of gratitude. Why? Because criticism like Forbes tends to induce corrective reactions like Leslie's and Bob's. More important, it tends to result in introspection. Let's face it: That Forbes story made a lot of people think about the golf industry and where it's going.

I did. And you know what? Golf is healthy and about to get healthier — a fact illustrated by several developments that have only recently come to light.

As I noted last month, flat participation figures will soon feel the omnipresent influence of the Baby Boomer generation. This is no revelation, but soon there will be so many 50-year-old former peacocks on the golf course, there won't be enough parking spots for their new BMWs.

What is new? Golf is apparently connected with Generation X. Yes, if USA Today's front-page story (Sept. 13-15) is to be believed, the 18-30 crowd is beginning to see the light with regard to this fine game of ours. For this we have Hootie and the Blowfish's Darius Rucker and REM bassist Mike Mills to thank. Some young punks may pull out their nose rings when they find out rockers dig golf, but just as many will regard playing golf. Also, a lot of them are professional people and they, as a whole, are the ones playing golf.

Jeff's explanation would, indeed, belie my findings as having less clout that I thought. But Jeff, I think, is like a lot of guys my age. He quit golf for a number of years — through college and his early 20s, then took it up again when he reached his 40s. When did he resume the game? "When my father gave me some lessons last August and he liked it."

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Can I make a case here? While the folks at Forbes magazine and the National Golf Foundation duke it out (opposite page), I did a little microcosmic study of my high school classmates and unearthed a startling fact. If replicated countrywide, this fact would send investors and entrepreneurs scurrying to dump their dough into golf projects. A whopping 40 percent of the men in my Class of 1966 are golfers. That is, when asked their "hobbies and interests," they independently wrote down "golf."

(That was with no arm-twisting from me or old golfing bud Barry Hobert. No one was whispering in their ears, offering free subscriptions to Golf Course News or discounts rounds of golf at Sugarloaf. No one urged them on with Johnny Carlson-like chip-shot swings.)

I realize this is anecdotal evidence, but 40 percent is twice as many as the NGF reports in its latest participation survey of males aged 40-49. An anomaly? Perhaps, but the figure could be higher, still, than 40 percent, because many of the jocks in my class did not respond to the survey. I called my old pal Jeff Waring, now a stockbroker in Bangor, Maine, and asked him about this. Jeff, who attended Willard Junior Academy his last three years, but he was our summertime buddy and our class claimed him as ours (something like Chappaquiddick claiming Ted Kennedy). Anyhow, Jeff explained: "Our class was different from other classes. Most of the athletes were in the top academic division and were active in everything. Usually a lot of athletes came from the lower division. That same group is playing golf. Also, a lot of them are professional people and they, as a whole, are the only ones playing golf."

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