

Blots

Patrick Smartt

Like many an escutcheon, golf score cards have blots on them. There are two columns of respectable figures, spoiled when there stands out like some painful boil an 8 or more.

It is illusory to suppose that the player with a medium or long handicap plays every hole poorly. He will to his pleasure have a good hole here and there. The improbable is part and parcel of golf, so one must assume that some 18 handicap player has scored exactly one stroke over the S.S.S. at every hole in the round. Though I must take leave to doubt it.

There is, however, displayed in the Club House of The Royal Ashdown Golf Club a card showing a total of 72, each hole accomplished in 4. The player was Bobby Locke, then an amateur. No blots, though he may have considered failure to get 3s at the short holes as such. Personal standards differ.

It is interesting to speculate on those disastrous holes that suddenly assail the golfer. In the days when it was my duty to check score cards, I made a point of ringing any outrageous figure at a hole on the card of a young and improving golfer, or an already established one. My purpose being to emphasise to the handicapping committee that it could be disregarded in assessing the player's ability, as being 'one of those things'.

The causes of these sudden reverses are manifold. It is not uncommon to hear a player stating that he hates a certain hole: 'Can't play it.' Many years ago the press (and biographers)

had a splendid time with what they called 'Bobby Jones' ghost hole'. It is a matter of confidence, and that hole can be conquered if instead of grouching about it, the victim went out and played it over and over again. He will master it, and arrive at the stage: 'Fear knocked at the door. Faith opened it . . . and there was no one there'. My goodness me, how that creed can be applied to every stroke in the game—perhaps above all to putting.

Disasters are governed to a large extent by the nature of the course or links. Despite a picture, still vivid in the mind's eye, of Lee Trevino in the scrub on the summit of a sand dune at the 71st hole at Royal Birkdale, I venture to suggest that, in general, recovery strokes offer themselves more frequently on links. They are more open, and there is room to swing the club. Tree-lined courses, provided the ball is not cupped in the roots, pose a problem. The chance of playing through them, or chipping sideways on to the fairway. The latter method will reduce the likelihood of 8s or double figures.

Lush grass rough (barbered nowadays) on park courses, detracts from any chance of a long shot. Finally we come to the heath or common course. Gorse and heather, with which I am only too familiar—not to mention bracken—are the destroyers. It is true that the club can be swung in heather, less easily through the entwining grip of bracken, but in either instance it is difficult to get the club face sharply onto the ball.

Gorse is the ultimate in destruction. Unless golf's guardian angels are with us, it means three off the tee and four for the second if that has gone astray. The only difference between the scratch and the mediocre player being that the former will be nearer the green when playing either stroke.

Although these blots can occur anywhere in the round, they may be expected early with the handicap

golfer because he has not loosened up. Nothing will induce him to arrive five minutes early, and spend them in swinging a club. There is no drudgery in it. If he is one of those who think such action means he is taking the game too seriously, that is his business. But he must not then grumble at a poor start.

That is but one reason why these horrors creep in. There are others. It suddenly dawns upon the competitor in the monthly medal that he is doing well. The immediate reaction is he starts to play cautiously; he tightens up and that is the end. There is the direct opposite, in particular with the better players. Everything is going beautifully, the sky is blue, the larks singing, and in his state of euphoria our golfer feels he could carry the church steeple a couple of miles away. Exuberance is his undoing, he gives the ball an 'unmerciful thrash' and it sails away into the deepest rough.

Fear, as has been suggested earlier, enters into this business. Between the teeing-ground and the green, or fairway, lies a deep ravine which could be carried with a No. 4 iron. The psychological effect upon the striker is to expand the carry by many yards. It makes no matter which club he takes, that ravine is in his mind . . . and that is where the ball finishes. A stream, or expansive bunker will evoke the same tension.

These blots on those infernal, but indisputable records on pieces of card-board are a matter for commiseration. But, in brutal fact, the inflammation can be reduced. In many, many instances after a wild stroke the golfer attempts too much in his recovery measures. A little thought given to the situation, a reasoned assessment of the probabilities, and **not** the dubious possibilities, can make a deal of difference.

Contradictory as it may seem, a decision to cut one's losses will diminish them. That 8 can be turned into a 6.

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