

The amateur golfer and the superintendent – golf's ultimate partnership

By FRANK D. TATUM, JR
President USGA 1978-1979,
San Francisco, California

WE should start our analysis of this partnership by defining our terms. First, what and who is an amateur? The word amateur derives from the Latin word *amatorem*, which roughly translated means 'one who loves.' Quite simply, therefore, an amateur golfer is one who loves the game.

Using that definition, we draw very different lines around who is and who is not an amateur. For example, I give you Ben Crenshaw as the quintessential amateur golfer. On the other hand, Joe Hustler out there this morning at some golf course looking for a sucker to pick clean or Sam Salesman, whose sole reason for belonging to a country club and whose interest in the game begins and ends with how much he can extract from the playing of it, are anything but amateur golfers.

For our purposes here, we should add a dimension to the definition of amateur golfer – that is, while the word *amateur* takes care of the *heart* factor, there also is a *soul* factor that is encompassed in the designation of *true believer*. True believers are those who understand the metaphysical connections that distinguish the game of golf. Perhaps those connections can best be illustrated by something Alistair Cooke wrote in his foreword to a tour de force on golf written by Sir Guy Campbell, where, according to Alistair: 'Sir Guy Campbell's classic account of the formation of the links beginning with Genesis and moving step by step to the thrilling arrival of "tilth" on the fingers of coastal land, suggests that such notable features of our planet as dinosaurs, the prairies, the Himalayas, the seagull, the female of the species herself, were *accidental by-products* of The

The United States Golf Association session at the annual Golf Course Superintendents' Association of America conference is always a highlight of an interesting week.

Attendance at the GCSAA conference and show is a must and the 1987 venue is Phoenix, Arizona at the end of January.

The USGA programme in 1986 had, as its main theme, how to manage today's golf-course architecture. However, it was a paper by Sandy Tatum that caught most delegates'

Almighty's preoccupation with the creation of the Old Course at St Andrews.'

Having so identified one side of this partnership we are here considering, we need to define whom we are talking about when we identify someone as a golf course superintendent. Obviously, the person can be, and often is, a true believer amateur, but he also, quite distinctly, is something more. He is, for example, someone who regularly starts his day in the middle of the night. While his workplace certainly is air-conditioned and has a lot of sophisticated plumbing, it definitely does not have central heating.

His professional life is a never-ending battle with enemies of infinite number and variety, including an exotic array of fungi and a horrendous army of bugs.

He works with people who think developing turfgrass is a whole lot easier than maintaining a front lawn. They have to think so to retain some measure of self-respect, because our partner manages to develop 100-plus acres of turfgrass to such a condition as to make a typical struggler with 400 square yards of lawn turn green with envy. And then, however, all our hero hears about is two or three patches totalling a relatively few square feet where

imagination as it summed up what golf is all about – not just a game or a golf course to be maintained, but a way of life.

Sadly, the paper was not delivered by Sandy, as he, together with partner Tom Watson, were playing in a rain-delayed pro-am at Pebble Beach.

Sandy Tatum is involved in a new links at Pebble Beach, to be known as The Links At Spanish Bay. His great knowledge of UK links, as a member of several clubs, will no doubt stand him in good stead.

the bugs or the fungus or the golf carts have won a temporary victory in the war he wages with them.

The mortal combats in which he is locked also include those with the most monstrous monstrosity ever inflicted on the game – an infernal piece of turfgrass-consuming machinery masquerading under the name of a golf cart. I resist, reluctantly, the temptation to carry on telling you how I think and feel about those abominations.

Vagaries

As if having to deal with the vagaries of nature were not enough, he has to schedule his maintenance to accommodate a calendar of events that looks something like the schedule of events for the Olympic Games.

Finally, he reports to someone identified as the chairman of the green committee. Now these chairmen of green committees are very important people in relation to this ultimate partnership we are considering. So important, in fact, that it is not a diversion to spend a bit of time identifying them as well.

In their lives beyond the green committee, most of these VIPs are at worst tolerable types and at best exemplary citizens. Some of them maintain those charac-

teristics even after they become chairmen of green committees. But then, others somehow are transformed by such chairmanship and the transformation involves:

- Immediate mastery of the art and science of growing turfgrass that makes obsolete the entire body of experience and knowledge known as agronomy.

- Absolute and ultimate wisdom pertaining to golf course architecture.

- Dictatorial approach to the relationship with the golf course superintendent that has Hitlerian overtones.

We should pause here, lest we begin feeling too sorry for this beleaguered battler with the elements, the fungi, the bugs, the golf carts and the chairmen of green committees and consider the benefits that flow to the superintendent in the pursuit of his profession.

Take, for example, his workplace. To compare the sight and the aroma of a beautiful golf course in the morning sunlight with the settings in which most of us are constrained to earn our livings, puts all of these tribulations I have been identifying in the proper perspective.

His responsibilities, moreover, provide very positive distinguishing features of the profession he is privileged to pursue. It is worth a few moments focus on how those responsibilities affect our ultimate partnership. For example:

- What he does and how he does it determine whether the architect will have succeeded in providing the player with an experience both interesting and challenging.

- Beyond what the architect may have envisioned, the superintendent, by what he does and how he does it, makes fundamental philosophical decisions going to the heart of the game. To illustrate, in a real sense he has the final determination on such matters as:

- How much of a factor should length be in the playing of the game?

- How important should it be whether the ball stays in the fairway or runs off into the areas beyond?

- How important should the factors of bounce and roll be in the player's perception of the shot he is called upon to play?

- How much should proper

striking of the ball matter in terms of whether or not the ball will stay on the green to which it is hit?

- To what extent does it matter to have the pace of the greens at nine feet on the Stimpmeter as opposed to six feet?

I cannot resist noting with regard to those factors that, in each case, the answer essentially is determined by how much water the superintendent chooses to lay on the course. While I will spare you, as I have done with regard to golf carts, the full extent of my feelings on this subject, I am moved to say that the overuse of water is the ultimate cop-out for the superintendent, who somehow has been persuaded that cemetery green provides the proper look for a golf course and, furthermore, that such a cop-out is a gross breach of both the letter and the spirit of this ultimate partnership we are here considering.

True meaning

That brings us to an exposition of what is involved in this partnership and that is the realization of the true meaning of this game called golf. The pursuit of that thought requires some further definition, because the term golf can have such very different meanings depending on how it is perceived.

Take, for example, the anonymous Oxford don who defined golf as a game that consists in 'putting little balls into little holes with instruments very ill adapted for the purpose.'

On the other hand, when you listen to the lyricism that can make positive poets out of true believer amateurs when they are describing their feelings about this game, it all comes into proper perspective.

For me, the game defines itself in terms of the characteristics required of anyone presuming to call himself or herself a golfer. First, there is self-reliance. When you are out there contemplating a golf shot, calling on the outer limits of your skill, you have no one going for you but you. Then, there is the capacity to deal with your inadequacies. In this connection, I am reminded of the poor soul whose topped shot rolled into the water hazard fronting the 18th green. It was the final humiliation to which he reacted quite understandably.

First, he meticulously saw to it, one club at a time, that all of his

clubs ended up in the water hazard with the ball. Next, he removed the bag from his cadie's shoulder and deposited that in the water hazard as well. He then headed resolutely for the bar.

Some hours later, after the sun had gone down, he re-emerged from the clubhouse, returned to the scene of his humiliation, removed his trousers, waded into the hazard, located the golf bag, brought it back to the hazard bank, unzipped one of the pockets, removed his car keys and, with suitable ceremony, redeposited the golf bag in the hazard.

And then there is the closely related requirement for the playing of this game of accepting responsibility for your own inadequacies. We are all familiar with the type who refers to the noise being made by some burrowing worm, or the racket being made by a butterfly flapping its wings as the cause of a lousy golf shot.

Related to that is the characteristic of understanding and accommodating the limits of one's ability. Trying too often to execute Nicklausian golf shots is a sure route to a nervous breakdown.

And then there is the strength of character required to blow the whistle on yourself. In a typically perceptive piece, stimulated by an incident at one tournament, a sports writer noted how distinctively different golf, in this respect, is from any other sport. With basketball coaches throwing chairs on to court, baseball managers kicking dirt on umpires. John McEnroe foul-mouthing legitimate line calls and football players trying to get away with mayhem, the writer found it distinctly refreshing to have Sandy Lyle announce, after hitting a second shot from the rough on to the tenth green, that he had played the wrong ball, thereby turning what could have been a three into an eight. When queried about it later, in view of the fact that nobody but Sandy knew that he had played the wrong ball, he simply said that not calling the penalty on himself was unthinkable.

Finally, and in a way summing it all up, the true believer amateur is someone who can and does ap-

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(1937) by Peter Lawless – a very good anthology.

Abe Mitchell and George Duncan were among those who wrote books on technique that also give sidelights on the nature of the game in their day.

Henry Cotton was a prolific writer and photographer and, especially in *This Game Of Golf* (1948), he began to chronicle changes in the American game which, when transplanted to this country, were not always beneficial.

Bobby Jones and Henry Longhurst were always entertaining while filling in background detail.

Robert H.K. Browning, editor for many years of *Golfing* magazine, was a perceptive writer with one special gem *A History Of Golf – The Royal Ancient Game* (1955).

This list could go on and on, but if I had to select just one

book to take with my records to that desert island, it would be *A History Of Golf In Britain*, edited by Sir Guy Campbell and published in 1952. I remember that my wife bought it for my birthday that year. I think it cost two guineas (£2.10), a lot of money for a book in those days, but it remains a favourite bedside volume. Better than any other, it describes how the game started and progressed for many years.

I am reminded that this study of history opens the doors to the study of your own course. There may be a club history, but it is even more interesting to study the history of greenkeeping methods at a particular club.

Chairmen of green committees might think of looking up old minute books with a view to staff trying to piece together the history of the environment in which they work. The idea that

each generation should start again with its knowledge is plainly ridiculous and wasteful. Why not find out more about what went before on your course?

Golf writers today do not seem to discuss or query the philosophy of the game. Reports in the Press and magazines are little more than blow-by-blow accounts of a player's progress, as related to par, in an event.

As tournaments are frequently played on courses that seem to be a poor test of shot making and ball control, you have to wonder if writers have been told *not* to give readers the details. Or perhaps it is simply because their living is dependent on the 'pro' circuits. We seem to have to go back in time to find a free, frank and informed Press.

Next time, I will look at books on golf courses, especially those on golf architecture.

Golf's ultimate partnership Continued...

preciate fully all of the characteristics that make golf such a truly beautiful game.

Therein, in essence, lies the key element of this ultimate partnership, where one partner, the superintendent, provides the beautifully playable playing surfaces and the other partner, the true believer amateur, mobilises and brings to bear all of the characteristics that make what the superintendent has done worth the doing.

Having so identified and joined this partnership, we need some further definition of its purposes.

First, all of us should join in the mission of preserving and promoting this ancient and honorable game. We should note that promoting and preserving are not necessarily complementary activities. A lot of promoters hovering around this game are anything but preservers.

We should also note that it is worth preserving, not so much because it is ancient (although its antiquity helps to distinguish it), but because its heart and its soul

derive from its being, above all, honorable.

The honorable part of it is given some distinctive emphasis by the fact that, in all of its long history, no one has reached the very pinnacle of this game who was not a person of distinctive character. In considering that remarkable distinction, contemplate the Tom Morrises, both old and young, Vardon, Jones, Hogan, Nelson, Palmer, Watson, and Nicklaus. Is there any other game, or indeed any other activity, that has identified such an array of quality as the very best of their respective times?

While we are promoting, we should be promoting understanding among the partners – on the true believer amateur side, appreciation for all the incredible complexity involved in properly maintaining a golf course, and on the superintendent's side, what a relatively lousy experience it is to slog around an overwatered golf course.

Finally, I am moved to observe that if he had not been so involv-

ed in Elizabethan drama and if access to the game had been easier in the 16th century, William Shakespeare surely would have been a golfer. Why am I so sure? Because anyone with such poetry in his soul could not have resisted the game, given any exposure to it, and, 'To thine own self be true,' has to be the ultimate credo of the true believer amateur.

While to be or not to be true to himself is a choice a golfer can make, no such choice is available to the superintendent in the pursuit of his profession. Nature does not allow him any counterpart of the self-conceded putt or the surreptitiously improved lie. Every decision the superintendent makes, good or bad, is inevitably reflected in the way the golf course looks and plays.

In that sense, therefore, they are unequal partners. In the much more important sense, however, of determining whether all that the game can be and mean is going to be realised, they are not just equal partners, but, indeed, golf's ultimate partnership.