

Sandy McDivot sees some interesting sights, as he takes up a spot of people watching while tending to his course at Sludgecombe Pay and Play

Senior service

One of the joys of working as a greenkeeper is the fascination one gets from observing people. Golf clubs in particular seem to attract a strange group of individuals that are not to be found in other walks of life.

Take their clothes for instance. If you saw someone dressed in luminous green, tightly fitting trousers with a lurid yellow jumper and perhaps a totally unco-ordinated bright red shirt going to the local shops, you would find it difficult not to conclude that they were a sad example of care in the community. Yet at a golf club this sort of behaviour is considered completely normal.

Look at the seniors at a golf club. Within this seemingly small and innocuous little section of the golfing species lies a wealth of character and eccentricities not to be found in any other walk of life.

For starters, they change their shoes in the car park and shuffle off to the 1st tee without ever entering the pro shop.

There is no need to purchase a new glove as the emaciated relic that they wear has got years left in it, and besides, Henry Cotton endorsed it.

You may have concluded that all senior golfers are essentially the same but let me assure you, within this group there are many sub species all with differing habitats, markings and behaviour.

For example, many years ago I had the pleasure of working at one of

those ancient and exclusive clubs to be found not far from the metropolis. Being a keen golfer, the club let me join the artisan section. This introduced me to a very rare but not quite extinct species of senior that still manage to survive to this day in the few remaining artisan outposts and occasionally the odd isolated municipal operation. These people were, to say the least, rough around the edges. Their language was incredibly crude; their clothes were used primarily for the rough trades with which they scraped a living at. Their golf was totally lacking in any subtleties, such as lining up or choosing the right club.

But despite this they were all an utter delight to play golf with. Indulging in pre golf whiskies at 10am, recalling an endless stream of filthy stories and breaking wind on a regular basis seemed to be the standard behaviour of these hilarious characters.

One could not imagine this sort of behaviour among another division of the senior section that is to be found at the other end of the social spectrum. This is the totally fascinating upper class senior, the ex-military types or the wealthy gentry, barristers and lawyers. At one time, this particular group of senior used to completely dominate golf club life throughout the length and breadth of the country. They are now sadly depleted in numbers but do however still manage to keep a stronghold at some of the better links and heathland tracks around the country.

They, like the artisans can be identified by their plumage, which in this case consists of plus fours and a tweed jacket designed by the same person that invented the straight jacket. This particular article of clothing insures that any sort of body turn is impossi-

ble without an immediate collapse of the left arm and a type of lurching movement on the follow through. This ensures the ball is never allowed to climb more than about six foot off the ground, perfect for the links golf in which they are so adept.

There are several other behavioural patterns that enables the educated greenkeeper to identify this type of senior golfer. One is their strange perception of chronology, whereby they see any one of their own sorts as being young, right up to the age of about 65. Before that they are referred to as "Young Parsons" or "Young Critchlow".

In fact I believe at places such as Muirfield or Little Aston where these marvellous gentlemen still dominate, you only come out of the junior section at about the age of 50. After an apprenticeship of 40 or so years they are drafted into one of the foursomes groups that meet on a regular basis. These congregate in the clubhouse at about 7am complete with navy blazers old school ties etc. They then change into their straitjackets and head for the 1st tee where they play foursomes golf at breakneck speed. They play it to an incredibly high standard given their age. They are round the course in two and half-hours exactly, change back into their blazers and retire for lunch in the clubhouse. This will usually consist of roast mutton; potatoes that look like they have been cooked by laser beam and cabbage that cook put on to boil the evening before. This food reminds them of their days at Eton or Harrow or one of those other educational establishments that prided itself on preparing some of the most ghastly food known to man. This assault on the digestive system is then all washed down with a few pink gins

CUT-PRICE GOLF



and a bottle of claret. They then change back into their tweeds and head back out to the 1st tee for the afternoon round, which takes precisely two hours 35 minutes. The extra five minutes being allowed for relieving themselves of the lunchtime beverages. Actually, this type of senior can during their lifetime of golf be regarded as the best possible members. Their behaviour will always be impeccable, they play golf at such a pace that they hold no one up and they are regularly to be found investing money in the clubhouse services.

Then to cap it all, when they reach the age when they are in danger of slowing their partners down to above the permitted two and a half hours they selflessly permanently retire themselves to the clubhouse. If you ever manage to play Muirfield or St Andrews you can see these gentlemen seated just inside the bay windows complete with pink gin and a copy of *The Times*. In fact, seeing as one can play a complete round of golf and return to find them still in the exact same position and still apparently reading the same page of the *Times*, one could conclude they have been ceremonially stuffed upon their departure of this world and placed in a permanent position in their favourite chesterfield.

There is another sub species of senior that has always fascinated me. This is the one whose whole life is dedicated to the art of thrift. They are, as the French would say, as tight as the derriere de le canard, or words to that affect. Far from being few in number, these seniors can be found at every club throughout the country, provided that is, the annual sub is reasonably low.

They can be very easily identified at any club. For starters, they change

their shoes in the car park and shuffle off to the 1st tee without ever entering the pro shop. There is no need to purchase a new glove as the emaciated relic that they wear has got years left in it, and besides, Henry Cotton endorsed it. I used to work at a club in the south of Devon where these seniors were rife.

The club pro told me of how they once had a club Captain who fell right into this category of golfer. During the year it was customary for there to be a series of captain/pro matches. In the first one in January the pro told me how the Captain arrived at the club and changed into his familiar jumper and trousers that looked like they were purchased in a car boot sale some time in the 1950's. At the end of the round they were replaced back in the locker. This procedure was then repeated throughout the year without the clothes once being taken home to be washed.

By November he was a walking health hazard but think of the money he saved in washing powder.

This compulsive frugality extends to every aspect of their golf. Their clubs are a mismatch of 1960's rejects with a sweet spot made up of a small cluster of atoms adjacent to the hosel and the woods are of laminated wood construction with the whipping stuck down with insulation tape.

The tee pegs are tied together with old garden string so as to prevent the loss of a penny investment and the golf balls come out of the vast collection they have built up over the years of scavenging through the

under-growth when the course is closed.

Even their golf swings, which are short and proddy, are designed to ensure that the ball never deviates from a straight line so as not to squander their golf ball hoard. What is really frightening about these guys, is how they insist on playing every day. This is a result of some elementary mathematics that they indulged in whereby they calculated that having parted with their annual sub, the more they play, the cheaper their golf becomes.

One such golfer recently imparted with me the information that he was only paying £1.30 per round.

Occasionally when they had had a particularly exhilarating round of golf (a score in the low 120's without

losing a ball) they would indulge in the only known nutritional input their frail bodies require; a pot of tea for two with four cups and a slice of toast.

But even these characters have their own particular charm about them, quietly filling every empty space on the course. All they want from life is to play golf 365 days a year or 366 in a leap year.

The senior golfers that are to be found throughout this country of ours have become a kind of living part of our heritage. Golf club life would be left with a huge void without them. I for one, hope that these fine old characters remain a permanent fixture at every club. Who knows, in years to come, maybe we will be the ones waiting to tee off in a freezing February gale.

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Pay and Play.