

Lost tradition equals lost manners

In the scramble to squeeze in the maximum amount of play from dawn to darkness, and the Devil take the hindmost, some golf course operators may be forgetting what the game once stood for.

Worse, comparative newcomers, with less than a nodding acquaintance of golfing history, may be doing the sport a disservice.

At some courses courtesy, manners and respect for the individual are being swept



away by the player crush and the rush to the cash register. In many parts of the country, there simply aren't enough courses. The law of supply and demand takes over.

The prospective player is charged what the traffic will bear. Registration and tee-time assignment may be pleasant enough in the pro shop or control room but, once the first tee is reached, it's "Watch your step."

It can be a jungle out there. The first confrontation comes with the Starter. He's under considerable pressure to maintain an eight-minute tee-time pace more precise than approximate.

If an early group takes a few extra practice swings — or, the worst Starter scenario, three or four minutes of arranging games and bets follows chit-chat — real tee trouble

looms.

The most tactful and diplomatic Starter is put to the politeness test when the golf cars start backing up, and there is constant "When am I up?" inquiry.

Once off the tee, there lurks the Ranger. He's charged with keeping the play moving. Having an open hole — no players occupying that precious turf on an otherwise-crowded course — is a situation that must be remedied quickly.

The foursome causing the open area is therefore cajoled, urged or threatened to "get a move on, close the gap, or else."

The last admonition implies, "Shake a leg or drop back — or leave the course."

These warnings may be necessary in the modern scheme of golf, but they fail to address with some sympathy and understanding the avalanche of recent retirees who had looked longingly at golf "as their game of the future suddenly arrived."

Where do they fit into this frenetic picture? Unhappily, they don't.

Most aren't skilled enough to keep pace. They're surrounded and besieged by fellow humans with low levels of tolerance and impatience.

This quandary isn't confined to the senior golfer slowed by the years.

Equally enthusiastic younger persons frequently are rated a course hazard because of their "spray and stray" play and

COMMENT

their lack of game knowledge.

Course superintendents and their staffs have been horrified by ebullient players whooping it up on the course, taking big divots and generally wandering about aimlessly.

A hurried call to the pro shop or a hasty summoning of the Ranger usually brings a stop to course abuse, but some damage can't be undone.

Perhaps it's too late for a solution, only lament for golf as it once was.

Gone forever may be the pleasurable afternoon of foursome comradeship and camaraderie, a 3-hour and 10-minute stroll made more comfortable with caddies.

Cars weren't part of the playing picture. They were strictly for transport to and from the course.

There was no elbowing for tee times, just a gentleman's understanding of the teeoff order. And it was no big deal at the Portland (Maine) Country Club 40-50 years ago if a fast foursome, descendants of the club's founding fathers, after church Sunday mornings found an open space, be it the third, 13th or 16th holes, teed up and took off. They held no one up.

When they finally ran into a logjam, they'd leave the course, content to have managed 12 or 13 holes as brisk pre-dinner exercise. No muss, no fuss, no unsettling comment directed at others sharing the same enjoyment.

When did we scrap such tradition, and can there be a return to courtesy and civility?

As the numbers increase, the odds lessen. Very few will have caddie background and they won't be aware of either the social niceties or game flavor, but rather the basic approach.

Some hope is offered in educational programs, but at best they are crash courses designed to take the rough edges off the novice. It takes a heap of exposure and experience to obtain a workable understanding of what's going on out there.

Still, as one exasperated Ranger observed,

"People who buy cars aren't automatically put out on the street on their own. They must pass a driving test and demonstrate responsibility. The same for a guy who buys a yacht. He can't put on a gold-trimmed cap and call himself a commodore. The Coast Guard would sink him quickly."

It should be the same for the golf beginner. Just buying clubs and finding a place to play aren't enough. The hopeful should be acquainted with the basics before venturing onto the course.

The next question is, "Who is going to provide such information and instruction?"

If in the North or Midwest, a professional idled by winter might be available. In the South, where the action is year-round, there's no time for such time out. Everyone's on their own.

Whatever the attempts to cope with crowds and the less-experienced players, there is no room on the course for rudeness. Harassment has no place in what should be the most pleasant of atmospheres.

In what other business is the customer treated, not just cavalierly, but too often crudely? How humiliating it must be to be approached (make that accosted), offered a fee refund and a free ride to the range for complimentary lessons.

Oh, there's the added sop of a later starting time couched in such polite wording as "more conducive to everyone's enjoyment of the facility." What is meant is, "Play when you are not in the way."

At times, intolerance spills over into other areas. Boards of directors insist on periodic crackdowns for violations of club course rules. Again the unaware, less-seasoned player is hit hardest.

Let me cite a personal experience as a Ranger in Florida. A gracious woman golfer was in trouble over the green. Far away from the cart path, she returned her car near the back of the green, not in any damaging situation but definitely violating the rules.

She was issued (most sheepishly) a citation which led to harsh warning against repetition. At our next meeting, I explained my predicament in somewhat embarrassed, apologetic manner.

She replied softly, "I think a warning would have been more appropriate." I agreed — silently.

Soon, she and her husband were no more to be seen. Presumably, they had not taken kindly to such treatment and went elsewhere.

When one pays up to \$3,000 a year to play golf, and the experience isn't totally enjoyable as it almost always could be, it's time to either give up the game or seek new fields.

There is license for firmness in Scotland. Most have learned the game from the ground up, at an early age. Those who dally are dealt with severely.

It's a different story in America. A more charitable outlook isn't out of line.

The last thing the now-nervous golfer needs is a Ranger repeatedly riding his right shoulder, "monitoring" time taken and in general contributing to playing woes.

It's too bad the golf shoe isn't on the other foot. It would be nice to see the customer given the same courteous attention he'd receive in the business world.

If enough golfers switch sports in the twilight of their lives, there might be a return to etiquette. Unfortunately, tennis and other athletic pursuits just don't lend themselves to the delightful and wholesome environment that encompasses golf.

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