

You've probably noticed. Golf has reverted back to its pre-1997 place in the world. It's viewed by outsiders as an elitist, environmentally harmful pastime that's played only by the arrogant and corporate (is that redundant?).

Maybe it was the frown your great-grandfather failed to conceal when someone yelled into his one good ear that you're in the golf business. Or at your spouse's company holiday party, you mentioned your ties to golf. A few years ago, such a reference would earn something like, "Oh, really? I'm so glad we met. I've been thinking of taking up golf. Isn't Tiger amazing?"

Yes, you said. Tiger is the Second Coming. Then you suggested lessons with your course's best sweater folder and went on your way with pride. Golf was "cool."

Now all we get is, "Oh? Golf?"

What happened?

For one thing, our attention-deficit world-order can only devote its euphoria so long. Tiger gave golf a coolness extension with his 2000-2001 four-Majors-in-a-row-slam. Even into early 2002, golf was exempt when it seemed he might go on a real Grand Slam run.

Since midyear, golf's stock has gone the way of the real market. Most blame the demise on the economy. But as we head into 2003 and beyond, the hangover figures to last no matter what happens with the economy. Why?

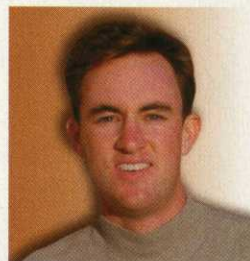
One reason is the environment. Golf is now regularly cited as public enemy No. 1 in fights over water, land and wildlife protection. The Bush Administration is working hard to undo as much environmental legislation as possible. Some of the laws are silly and unwieldy. Many more make perfect sense because they protect places that need preservation. (Do we really need obnoxious snowmobiles in Yellowstone? There isn't snow elsewhere?).

The Salton Sea in California may eventually be extinct because of water wasting golf courses. That was a recent passing shot in one of our nation's more reputable magazines. But the magazine apparently forgot that every new house in Las Vegas has a pool and a swampy front lawn.

Overcoming this fervent and at times irrational hatred of golf will be difficult in light of

Bummer! Golf Now Viewed as Uncool

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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various scandals. Environmentalists can point to the average American golfer's dream course, one that clashes with its native surroundings.

Another reason for golf's demise is Hootie Johnson. His spat with "that woman" will unfairly take most of the golf malaise blame. No matter how you feel about the membership issue, the saga reminds the rest of the world that golf has its share of odd, out-of-touch characters — golf's versions of Trent Lott and William Byrd.

When Enron and the economy went, so did our rapture with CEOs. When he pointed his bayonet with that press release, Hootie forgot that golf is often associated with corporate greed, making golf an easy target. Johnson and golf's big wigs have been put on alert: When you make a lot of money as a nonprofit organization, you have to play by modern society's rules no matter how silly they may seem.

Another reason for golf's fall is inaccessibility. If underprivileged and even privileged kids were allowed to caddy, they'd have a much better chance of getting into golf. They'd earn money outdoors, get to watch adults make fools of themselves and maybe even take up golf in a natural, unforced way. If there were more affordable, shorter public courses along with some beginner facilities, the sport would actually grow the way its visionaries have hoped.

But no one will be sacrificing golf car revenue to let kids caddy. Building beginner or short courses is out of the question. Tiger's going to spend \$25 million for his 23-acre golf learning center in Anaheim. What a deal!

Well, golf may not be cool anymore, but it could be worse. We could be in the health-care industry. Or in the FBI. Or Arthur Andersen accountants or . . .

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