



ENJOYING GOLF (WITHOUT CLUBS)

By Monroe S. Miller

Golf, truly, is a great game. It's enjoying some renewed enthusiasm and appeal all across America, and I am feeling a little smug. I could have told you so, several years ago. I guess my love of the game goes back to the summer of 1963, nearly twenty-five years ago.

That was when I was *playing* golf, as opposed to *enjoying* it, like I am these days. A friend of mine would meet me at Craig's Drug Store on Main Street on summer Sunday afternoons. After a cherry Coke or two, we'd throw his clubs in the back seat of my '51 Chevy 2-door hardtop coupe (two tone paint, fender skirts, glass-packed mufflers) and we would head for Lancaster's 9-hole golf course about a dozen miles away.

It didn't take long for me to figure out I wasn't made for playing this game. I never did profess great athletic ability — it was most often a case of more strength and endurance than skill. You know — strong farm kid playing a line position on both offense and defense in football. As long as I didn't have to throw or catch the football, I did quite well; I suffer a total dearth of eye and hand coordination. Can't get a basketball through the hoop nor hit a baseball out of the infield. But I could run; not fast, but nearly forever. My event in track was the 880-yard run — one-half of one mile. It called for endurance, strength and very little speed — just what I could offer. I often left the competition panting in the dust.

Unfortunately, golf requires some skill; skills I do not come by naturally and skills I've never had the time to learn and develop. But I still love it — as a spectator.

Part of my problem with playing golf relates to the fact that I hate doing things — anything — badly. If I cannot do something well, or reasonably and respectably so, I just simply don't do it. And I play golf badly; really, very badly. Funny bad. I'm unable to shake the attitude 'do it well or not at all'. So I don't play golf.

It isn't that some modicum of effort hasn't been put forth — I certainly have given it the old college try. I've taken lessons: 'Keep your eye on the ball! Chin steady! Left arm stiff! Flex your knees! Hit from the inside out! Follow through! Keep your head down!' And so on, and so on, to no avail. I still only manage to "disturb" the ball, usually for very short distances.

That effort to become a player has involved reading, something I *do* enjoy. My office library has books by Tommy Armour (2), Billy Casper, Arnie Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, Ken Venturi, et. al., all advising on how to play golf. Not even these great players have helped my "game", if you have the courage to call it that.

Then there is that famous word of advice I have heard untold times — "practice"! 'Hit some balls!' 'Play a couple of holes every night!' 'Play golf at least twice a week.' 'Keep at it — if you don't use it (I assume that means newly acquired skills!) you'll lose it.' During those summers of youth, I was lucky to get that occasional Sunday afternoon free; otherwise my time was spent behind a hay baler, or a combine, cultivating corn or any one of the many other jobs farm kids spent time at in the summer. In my adult years, including those as a college student, my days have been occupied by golf courses and I seldom have been able to find the energy to return to the golf course to either practice or play.

That brings up a fundamental point, for me at least. I've never found it quite logical to go back to recreate where I've worked all day. In fact, it is very illogical; I can't think of any other professions where that is true. The 60 and 70 hour work weeks on my golf course leaves me with an emotional need to get away from it, not to come back in the evening for a little "fun". In fact, on those few occasions when I've been persuaded to return, my meager skills are diluted even more because of the distraction of working mentally instead of trying to play. I'm planning the next

day in my mind, reminding myself of things needing attention and generally have found myself miserable as I am tromping from tree to fairway and through the rough looking for my golf ball. I just cannot focus the needed attention on playing. Golf is of great value to millions because it brings relief from the cares of business. For me, it *is* business and I'd much rather be home reading a book.

As I look back on my life, I cannot believe some of the things I have accepted as truths. At one point, prior to starting at Blackhawk Country Club, I actually believed the theory that a Golf Course Superintendent needed to play golf to do his job well. Of course I realized very quickly that that was a maxim proposed either by Superintendents who learned to play golf really well in childhood or by players who never gave such silly babbling any depth of thought. To promote the idea that you have to play in order to provide the finest of playing conditions is the same as saying that Dr. Spock couldn't possibly know anything about babies because he never had one! The world of sports is full of examples of great coaches and managers who couldn't play the game that gave them fame. Neither would most of America's greatest sports writers have a shred of credibility in the pieces they write, analyzing games and giving comment, if they had to be accomplished players in all the sports they address. Obviously what is important for obstetricians, coaches, sports writers and Golf Course Superintendents is *understanding* what you are dealing with; that is critical. Execution is far less important, even insignificant.

The theory really falls apart when I consider it during one of my infrequent rounds of golf. When you play as badly as I do, it doesn't matter if my shot is coming from bare soil, a closely cropped ½" fairway or a 3" deep rough. The results are the same. It matters not if the pin is front or back, right or left. It is inconsequential if greens

are fast or slow. So where's the advantage of playing? In my case and many, many others like me, drawing a relationship between playing ability and competence as a golf course manager is perverse; that relationship just is not there.

They say a lot of what is required to play golf is psychological, and with that in mind I once tried, a long time ago, to overcome my dislike of doing things badly by following the advice I read in a short essay. The premise of that wonderful little composition was that the poorest of golf players had the best of it. It's the greatest game in the world to be bad at because, unlike other sports, the poor player gets the most strokes! With football, in my case, I never got to touch the football by throwing, catching or kicking it. But in golf, I get to do everything a good player does, only more often! If you are a bad player in softball, you might spend a game on the bench; a bad player in golf can play as often as he wishes. The theory sounds great and had a powerful appeal to me, the classic and chronic bad player. But the embarrassment of being bad remains to shake my senses back to reality very quickly.

So I've pretty much given up playing golf. Oh, each March I think to myself that maybe this year I'll take some lessons again and practice some and try to be a better player. But that is all a matter of dreaming; it never happens and I know it probably never will. But I do *enjoy* golf; I enjoy it tremendously. It is a spectator sport for me, not unlike football, baseball or basketball. And why shouldn't it be?

What is finer than, on a cold and dreary winter Sunday afternoon, to sit in one's study, fireplace flames flickering quietly, and watch a televised golf tournament? The afternoon passes quickly, the sight of green grass sends shivers of excitement and anticipation up your spine and the thrill of a close match at least equals that of any other sport or game shown for spectators.

I contend that you don't have to play to enjoy a close match between two players on the 11th fairway at Merion. Certainly non-players can be flushed with nervous excitement as their favorite player lines up a victory putt on the 18th at Augusta. For me, enjoying golf is visiting golf courses wherever I travel, and I have seen some of our country's greatest. Actually, I've gone to great lengths to see some courses; I recall being turned away from the Augusta National Golf Club by the guard at the gatehouse while I was in Military Police training at Fort Gordon, Georgia, just outside Augusta. On one rare Sunday afternoon off-duty while I was in the Army overseas, I armed myself to the teeth, got travel orders to Saigon, signed for a jeep at the motor-pool and took my life in my hands just to see if I could find a golf course I'd heard existed in that teeming, filthy war-torn city. Later that same year I took an eight-day R & R trip to Japan. First order of business? Find the golf course another GI had told me about that was in the shadow of Mt. Fuji. You really *do* have to enjoy golf to go through all of that.

A large part of the appeal of golf has to be the sheer aesthetic pleasure of

enjoying the beautiful surroundings of the golf course. You don't need clubs for that experience. Wasn't it even Bobby Jones who felt that, if golf was to be enjoyed, attractive scenery was the essential ingredient in the recipe for that pleasure? And if I am unable, physically, to execute the shots of a good player, I certainly do play holes and courses mentally, much like an architect must do during his design of a golf course. I like to fancy myself a great player, carefully weighing the risk and reward equation, planning ahead several shots and dropping forty-foot putts. What fun such daydreaming can be when one is walking his course, enjoying the exercise without even a single golf club in hand.

And the reward of being associated with this great game, even though I cannot play it well, is powerful — the game of men like Palmer and Nicklaus and Jones, Eisenhower and Hope and Old Tom Morris. The history and the mystery, the literature and the lore all exist in a state like no other sport.

Let there be no doubt that I wish I did play well. It would be so wonderful. But then, I wish I could dance, too; I might at times wish I was 6'2", 180 pounds with blond flowing hair. But I pine for none of these and cannot ever imagine being a happier man than I am today. So they cannot be very important, can they?

I agree with Doug Sanders, who once said: "To get the most out of golf you have to enjoy, not suffer through it." For me that means not playing. I doubt I'll even get my clubs out this year.

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