

# Walk, Don't Ride!

By David U. Cookson  
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Both as a physician and a golf traditionalist, I am increasingly disturbed by the seemingly inexorable overwhelming acceptance of the golf cart as standard equipment in any player's preparation for his next golf round — not only at frankly commercial golf resorts but at both public and private courses in every community nationwide. Indeed, golf is one of the fastest growing recreational activities in the nation, particularly among those between ages 25 to 40, and nearly universally these people being introduced to our splendid and fascinating game are starting with the belief that the golf cart is the natural and accepted method of getting the player and his equipment around the course. I submit that these days nearly all those who still disdain the cart are either those over age 50 who grew up with the game before carts were available, or those who learned as junior players because they caddied or were introduced through junior golf programs which did not use carts for junior play. This trend to "cart golf" is changing the nature of the game for the player by adversely affecting his physical and mental capabilities and performance. I would hope that I might encourage many of you reading this essay to consider walking the course more and riding less, in order to achieve some of the positive benefits to your game that I firmly insist will then occur.

I live now in a situation where I play golf mostly with retirement age players. Nearly all of them once had very good golf games, but only a few of them now play to anywhere near their former abilities. Partly this is a result of age itself, but it is otherwise obvious to me that those who stay physically fit and try to maintain flexibility are the ones who maintain their former skills. One can remain fit by exercising away from the course, but most of us won't do that, especially as we age; I long ago learned in my medical practice that exercise programs will be soon discontinued unless they are incorporated into a regular and periodic routine endeavor. A round of golf, if walked, provides four to five miles of good exercise, utilizing all the body's muscles and keeping it in good tone. If the golf bag is carried as well, it is good aerobic exercise and an easy way to keep from getting fat or aids in losing weight. If one has good muscle tone, one can more easily remain flexible, and there is no question that a major problem with older players is restriction of swing motion due to muscle and ligament tightening. Although these problems are more readily noted in the fifties and sixties, they insidiously begin in the thirties and forties, making it obvious that walk-

ing and remaining fit earlier on will enhance one's performance later in life. Similarly, golf performance suffers in the later holes of the round as one's stamina declines, and clearly the physically fit golfer who is used to walking and is in good condition will much less likely give out as the round is completed.

Perhaps the most common annoying and debilitating factor for golfers of all ages is muscle spasms and strains, particularly in the back and neck. It is clear to me incidentally, that in the absence of a muscle or ligament tear, the golf swing done properly will not harm a lower back or neck but will actually help relieve the spasm — if accompanied by a regimen of stretching and walking which helps restore these muscles to function normally. The most exacerbating factor for back spasms, and a common initiating mechanism of its own, is riding in and especially driving a golf cart. On these rare occasions when I'm riding a golf cart and I personally note a back spasm beginning, I will generally overcome it by stopping cart riding immediately and walking instead. Contrariwise, if I don't ride in carts I don't get back spasms on the golf course.

There is a mental plus as well as a physical benefit from walking the golf round. First of all, one is "on the ground" throughout with the adaptive benefits that this entails, such as not having to abruptly switch from riding to standing. Additionally, after a mentally disturbing bad shot, there is more time to regain composure before the next swing, and the physical act of walking helps to dissipate the excess adrenaline induced by the anger and distress of the missed shot. Also, approaching the hole more deliberately allows time to size up the requirements for the next shot and consider the options. I believe any golfer would play a better game walking rather than riding, because of the above considerations.

Course conditioning, too, is enhanced by players who walk. Obviously, the ground is less compacted and worn by golf shoes than by tires. Furthermore, the walking golfer is more likely to rake the bunkers, and sees his ball mark on the green more readily since he approaches from the front of the green and can observe the whole surface, unlike the cart rider who comes on to the green from the rear or the side.

The case for walking the golf course is strong, but often it is the golf club itself which erects barriers to walking since cart revenues are so lucrative and dependable. The player's influence at the club must be continually asserted

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to keep caddy programs going by an equitable balance between cart and caddy fees, and club rules mandating cart usages should be resisted. Clubs should provide four-bag cars where most players can walk each hole, and there must be continued reminders that golf is a healthful, physical fitness endeavor for players of all ages which will enhance both the quality of play and the number of years one will be able to enjoy the game.

Golf was designed as a game to be played walking, balancing the happy challenge of the game itself with the physical advantages of the exercise involved. If carts must be accepted, then use a four-bagger or walk half the holes if in a two-bagger. Better still, walk with a caddy, or if none is available, get the ultimate exercise by walking and carrying your clubs. Only then will you glean the fullest appreciation of the joys of the game.

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