

2007 June 25

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GOLF IN THE PROVINCES[1], PART 2

The "golf with my friends" phase

As I continued to move forward learning "provincial" golf, I would run into friends of mine from an aerospace technology firm where ten years before I'd done some engineering. I don't really remember the sequence, how our Fab Four was initially formed. But I had started keeping a record of all my rounds of golf from the very first, so it's in there.

I was asked to play one Saturday with Curly and Mo (not their real names)—it's always about who can get out; Curly tho married could always get the Saturday kitchen pass, and Mo being somewhat of a ladies' man in those days simply decided his main squeeze of the moment would have to get along as best she could without him during that timeframe—early in the season of 1993. Larry, unattached (to several things as it turns out), became the regular fourth later that year.

I guess you could say it just clicked. By 1994 we became a Regular Foursome.[2] I use the initial capital letters to suggest that a Regular Foursome is one of the bigger deals in the known universe... like the mating of wild yaks:

- a) It doesn't happen that often
- b) It doesn't last very long when it does happen
- c) Although it's varyingly painful and enjoyable (for the yaks), outside observers may find the behavior strange bordering on vulgar

(We're technically still a Regular Foursome, but because two years ago Mo hit the professional high road out of town in pursuit of the legal tender and because I'm often in New Hampshire saving souls for freedom, our regularness now is annual as opposed to weekly.)

If you take a survey around the country among the thousands of foursomes who play a weekly 18-hole round of golf, you will get thousands of different stories on how they started, their unique circumstances of play—public course or country club, early tee times or late, younger or older, richer or poorer, purely social or business related, high-handicap or low, walk or ride, etc.—and what keeps them together sometimes for years.

Probably our only common denominator is: we all enjoy the great outdoors while taking wild swipes at a tiny white projectile and talking guy stuff that takes our minds off anything really important in the grand scheme of the cosmos.

Our own gang of four, for nearly 15 years, liked to play Saturdays on less-expensive public courses we could walk, with tee times in the 10:30 a.m. range allowing us to sleep in a bit or exchange sweet nothings with our respective honeybunches. We now shoot bogey +/- 10. In the beginning, because I was shooting wretched double bogey, the teams became Larry and I vs. Mo and Curly.

Competition varies depending on the foursome—you have a host of standard ways of playing against one another, from Wolf to Scramble to Nassau—but Our Gang usually takes the best total stroke score per side for a shot and a beer. I.e. the losing side buys a shot and a beer for each of the winners... followed typically by more separately purchased beers and/or shots, detailed post mortems, and general gloating by the winners with (I'm sure what seems to them) rapier wit.

The competitiveness adds spice to the play. It also can breed some real-life harshness contrasting to the "big happy family" attitude one takes to the first tee. Golf, even on a nice day, especially when you're walking, can become a grind toward round's end. One's thoughts after shanking an iron or stubbing a putt then often turn U-G-L-Y, i.e. "Those bastards have the audacity to *breathe* during my backswing, I'll show them!"

Speaking of our gang's competition, I simply must share the classic meltdown our side experienced *vis-a-vis* "the McNasties" so many years ago, in fact, so many years ago perhaps it didn't really happen?!

We were finishing the 17th hole at White Lake Oaks, when Larry remarks to me so all can hear, "What's that sound, I just heard the door slamming shut." We had a six-stroke lead going into the 18th hole, a short and relatively simple par 5. "Yup, I can taste the Jack Daniels now," I replied.

SO WE STEPS UP TO THE TEE on 18:

It becomes a blur at that point: Larry hits a five-wood toward the right that results in a direct hit on a fence railing at the end of the tee box; the ball rockets back and nearly kills Curly. I dribble one off the the tee box on the left, then hook one effectively out of bounds behind a Caterpillar back-hoe (note to Imus critics: I did not say "black 'ho"). I pitch out then mishit my five-iron into the woods, drop and manage to hit the same club into the woods again a little farther down. Lying seven now and I haven't even got around the corner where I can reach the green; I really need to focus. Meanwhile, Larry has recovered from his ricochet off the tee, sends a fairly decent shot down the middle, stubs his fourth shot (a stub is where you barely strike the ball and it moves only a few feet), then catapults one into a ditch on the left in front of the earth-moving equipment. He's lying six when his shot to the green intersects one small branch of a tree and splashes into the water. He drops out, lying eight, pitches to the green, and two-putts for an 11. I chunk another one, pitch in range of the green, finally land on it, then two-putt out of my misery for a 12. Mo and Curly, who are watching this crazed exhibition with astonished glee, calmly finish with a combined score equal to my own. This leaves our side with an 11-stroke deficit on the hole and hands the McNasties a 5-stroke victory! Needless to say for the good guys, there was no joy in the Mudville bar that afternoon; after the Brutal Collapse of Team Larry that fateful day, for weeks Larry was drinking heavily and I made several emergency visits to my therapist.

Who says it's only a game?!

[1] Literary fans will recognize the similarity of my title to the wonderful book *Golf in the Kingdom* (1972, 1997), a spiritual journey to the source and meaning of the game, by Michael Murphy.

[2] My good friend and former English golf professional Mr. Peter Shanks (sic) informs me that technically a foursome is where one pair of competitors plays another pair of competitors and each side plays one ball, with each member of the pair taking alternate shots. But what the heck, most people on this side of the pond think of foursomes as four people playing golf generally.