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Golf in the Provinces[1], Part 3

The league and resort phase

As I left you in Part 2, Larry and I were self-destructing during a particularly sad instance of Regular Foursome play. Despite that confessional on a bad moment that I covered in Part 2, the Regular Foursome represents to me the pinnacle of provincial golf life because a) it's so rare and b) it's where you have the best chance to experience the widest range of the many Qualities—the agonies and the ecstasies—of the game.

Speaking of golf qua peak experience, I should mention Solitary Golf. Most of the guys I play with rarely if ever just show up at a course and play 18. But I love to play golf in solitude, especially when the course is uncrowded.

I usually play better and the inside quiet rejuvenates me.

But as you continue to play in loose pickup rounds, by yourself, or, if you're lucky, in a Regular Foursome, the opportunity to broaden the social experience usually presents itself with a company or scheduled league.

I was lucky to be invited to play on a small company offshoot league called T.O.U.R. (Thursdays Our Regular Round), which was formed because the regular company league was more focused on competition and rules to the diminishment of the sociological fun factor. We do observe common-sense rules that speed league play for normal recreational golfers[2], but have a simple handicapping and ranking system. Also, to discourage cliquishness, we used to draw balls out of a hat to determine our fellow competitors on any given night.

The leader of this alternative fun league is none other than Mo (not his real name) of my Regular Foursome. Mo is a natural leader. When he left for greener pastures, a couple of guys stepped up to take the reins; they're doing fine, but it led to a discussion of how difficult it is to find a combination of rare leadership traits with a willingness to do the work and accept the routine abuse along with the occasional word of praise.

Originally, when there were only 8-12 of us, we had a small league that was able to walk the nine holes. Nowadays, because so many courses make you ride carts—it means more money to the course in the short range—the league has grown to 20 players and we ride.

The game structure of league play is similar to the Regular Foursome: you tee off as a sequence of foursomes. (Four competitors per hole is the universal limit, except on some boonies' courses I've been on... where it seems they let you get around with however many relatives Billy Bob invited to the pig roast at the turn.)

We haven't discussed much about the etiquette, sociology, or even some of the performance characteristics of social golf in the provinces, mainly because it's such a big subject and it's been covered in books by professionals. Still, let me give you a few insights:

a) Hitting into Someone: This is a big no-no, even if the foursome in front of you turns into a sixsome. Golf balls in flight can kill (always be aware of anyone who can errantly launch a golf ball at you, especially in "shooting galleries" where fairways are side by side with no barriers between them. The proper etiquette for moving someone along who is slow is to hit over them. Just kidding, we're not that good. Phone the pro shop, have them send out Rocko and Bruno to reason with them. Ideally, they'll leave and head directly for the pig roast.

b) Bantering: Conversation is the social catalyst that makes the provincial-golf experience worthwhile. Most of the guys are married with kids, so it's always polite to ask how everyone at home is doing so long as it isn't during someone's backswing. Our league is pretty much Baby Boomer, tho a few of the next generation are being groomed. You should get to know these kids, maybe even adopt some of their lingo (like "dude," "awesome," "that's messed-up," etc.). Then afterward, the hot young chicks at the bar will think you are a real hep cat, Daddyo.

c) The Swing: They say a golf swing tells you a lot about a man's personality. If that's so, then some of these guys are total psychos. Kidding. Mostly they're just unevolved, unconventional. The teammate in

my Foursome, Larry, sometimes we call him Jesus, as in, "Jesus, how does anyone hit a golf ball like that!?" Once I saw four Japanese in carts come to a complete stop, drive to a position behind our teebox, and in awed silence watch Larry's teeshot.

T.O.U.R. was Mo's brainchild. Even though a handful of beer-sensitized rebels were on hand at the founding, he's the one who followed through and made it happen. Similarly, Mo came up with his annual "invitational" tournament, which has been held at various golf-ski resorts in northern Michigan for a generation.

The "Mo Better Invitational" is usually a three day affair where you play Sunday afternoon, all day Monday, and Tuesday morning, then head for home. He figured that by not holding it directly on the weekend we could save a few bucks.

Attendance is by formal invitation (these days, email) only. In addition to the regular T.O.U.R. players, Mo has tended to ask sentimental favorites like father and son combos who rarely play, coworkers who don't otherwise golf but would kill to get away from their families for three days, and special projects from the other side of the tracks.

One thing, don't ever take a Mo invitation for granted. Committing a social faux pas like violating the gentlemanly spirit of the game or welshing on a bet (or neglecting to inform him of some foxy lady hanging out in a local establishment—more an issue in the old days) will get you banned like a 15th club.[3]

The event has much lore and legend. While I'm relatively new to the Invitational, I've still managed to contribute my share:

A lot of the fellows who have been making the long-weekend trip lead fairly prosaic lives where, say, taking the family and the in-laws down to the ice cream parlor on Saturday nights represents a highlight. One Monday morning up north years ago, hungover, I wandered over to a deck chair and sat down on my coffee, creating a bright brown splotch on my white slacks right between the cheeks. Yessir, that's all I had to do, and now it's high lore for these fellows; you'd think they'd forget it after a while. What can I say, cheap thrills.

Just a couple of final comments to close out the story:

Aside from "golf with our friends" what Larry, Mo, Curly, and I like best about the up north experience is checking out the local color. One of our locations, The Gailes, pictured above, is near Oscoda, Michigan; it's not a big town and since Wurtsmith Air Force base closed in 1993 the main business is tourism.

We've gotten to know many interesting people by hanging out in the bars and pool halls. I'll never forget this biker bar in Oscoda where Mo and Curly are discussing auto racing technology with some drunk at the bar and I'm trying to hit on this nurse playing pool, asking if she's read anything by Ayn Rand.

Now that's excitement.

Having gone on several of these golf-resort journeys now, sometimes I put my sociologist hat on and try to make a few observations. I see that there are other groups who come up north, as well, and that most of them are white middle class; we also tend to be pretty well off compared to the people we see here. Sometimes the resorts are the main income generators for the surrounding towns.

Then I think of golf and economic class. Back in the 1950s I'll bet they were doing these golf trips as well, only fewer people could afford them and the sense of class difference was even greater. Today, there are a few more exclusive resorts which cater to the better to do. Okay, so I'm rambling now, maybe someone can write a paper.

It all makes me see golf as a normal part of life, but not necessarily a natural part. It's too damned hard to be natural. I spend more time at it than most, and I seem to continue to get more out of it, qua golf, than most. Too many guys just don't have the time.

But say you don't have the time, just spend some time on improvement. If you don't take it too seriously and strive only for slight annual improvements you can have fun with it... especially if you develop the golf peripherals with TLC, such as "where are we going afterwards?"

[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] Golf is a difficult game to play well for most recreational golfers. Even the strongest and most athletic guys struggle. There's a saying, "If you're breaking 80 (shooting less than 80) you're not paying enough attention to your real job."

That's a fairly accurate statement: I would say to break 80 consistently for 18 holes a reasonably coordinated man with experience in other sports—and who did not play golf as a youngster—would need to play 36-54 holes per week, practice/drill 6-8 hours per week, and spend another 2-4 hours per week reading and learning.

On the flip side of that, I would say if you play nine holes per week without any practice, drill, or learning—combined with customary beer consumption—(with rare exceptions) you are basically going to suck. If your coordination is average or worse, you are going to really suck. Your mental health will be vastly enhanced if you simply accept that fact and enjoy the one or two decent shots or putts among the 50-70 strokes you execute on golf night. Enjoy cart driving, being outside, your buds, etc.

[3] Players are only allowed 14 clubs by the rules.