

GOLF IN THE PROVINCES, PART 4

League year-end scramble

Oh! One more thing!

I knew it was going to be impossible to describe, in only three installments, golf as the average American Joe experiences it—installments that I threw together more or less spur of the moment back in July. There's so much more to the game, simply from the sociology.

Some of that is hinted at in part 3 as I try to give readers a sense of the typical long-weekend resort golf outing. A lot more can be understood from a description of league play itself: a typical men's league is assembled from guys who work with one another at the same company. One night per week they play nine holes after work.

It's semicompetitive in that you turn in your scores after each nine holes and you vie for the lowest average score, usually handicapped, by at the end of the season (typically 20-25 weeks). Then at the end of the year, the poor sucker who gets stuck managing the league—thanks, Chief—has to diplomatically tell his boss to buzz off while he makes arrangements for a year-end scramble tournament at some decent local venue. This year we go with the Coyote GC in South Lyon (MI).

Keep in mind the average level of play for the typical company league is anywhere between bogey and "why bother?". But because the scramble format—you take the best of four shots—tends to lift all games to par or better, if you can get over some of your own abysmal strokes[1], you can actually feel the elation that would come if you were ever to reach par or birdie all by yourself for an entire 18 holes.

It's pretty much an ideal day, hotter than normal for SE Michigan, humid. We meet for breakfast at a coffee shop in one of the nearby Walmarterized strip malls. Most of the T.O.U.R. (Thursday, Our Usual Round) players opt for the SUV-sized heap o' high-glycemic-load platters incongruously decorated with dainty garnishments. Coffee, many refills.

As we exit this hopelessly sprawled shopping center just off the Interstate 96 super slab, the morning haze gives the late morning rush-hour traffic an end-of-the-world feeling. Soon enough though, heading south on Milford Road, we're comfortingly rural again. It really is an excellently designed course; the sunlight shines back from a dew so thick I wonder if it rained last night.

We have six foursomes, and ours takes off number three. Not a bad position, because if you're number one taking off, it means the entire rest of the league is up on the tee box offering all kinds of helpful tips and encouragement:

For example, you've dribbled it a few feet in front of you: "Got it!" or "Way to get your safe one out," or "Just mark it with your powder puff," etc. And if you're last, it's worse, because the carts are circled around the 18th green, the louder guys amplified by copious amounts of beer and/or Bloody Marys, watching you chili dip a chip or bounce your approach shot into the water. Again, the gentle chiding and terms of endearment reach a crescendo... sometimes countered by a well-executed, esthetically garish moon (causing hecklers to scatter, gagging and hurling chunks) from one or two of the more ample. Yikes!

Mob psychology at its finest. But candidly, maybe because this is an engineering and engineering "fellow-traveler" crowd working for a decent private corporation, there's not a vicious bone in the entire assembly. These are good guys, the camaraderie is genuine.

I only wish it could improve my golf game.

This year I felt the team I drew was in the catbird seat, and this week I even put a couple of additional hours in at the driving range. I had a foursome where all were at least in the middle-of-the-pack category, so we were always going to have a ball "out there," always have a good chance at least for par. But we inexcusably bogeyed the final two holes on the front, and never made up the ground after that.

Personal Aside...

Because of the time I spend on my game relative to most of the others, I feel I should be much better than I am. Our league does have two A players (they shoot near par on their own), and for several years I've had the goal to at least reach A-minus stature. I read the books, watch the videos and DVDs, tune in the Golf Channel religiously, buy the training aids, stay in reasonable shape, and have taken several lessons during my now-15-year career. (I even have a personal friendship, and golf student-teacher

relationship, with a former English professional who played in the British Open a couple of times in the early 60s.)

Yet success, which I've come to define as shooting in the high 70s consistently, seems to elude me.

Excellence in golf, as excellence in life, requires three fundamental elements: physical, mental, and spiritual. I feel I've done the necessary work in the physical and mental spheres. I'm convinced my hangup lies in the spiritual area, and my recent readings of the Eckhart Tolle books—*The Power of Now* and *A New Earth*—suggest a solution.

What Tolle "discovers" is the classic Buddhist understanding that we are not our minds, indeed, that the cause of the problems most of us face is "runaway mind"—a mind that traps us in recriminations over the past or anxieties over the future. We've all heard the phrase, "You're too much in your head, dude." We too easily let our minds take over and distract us from what we're doing (from what we're being) by "shoulds" and "should have beens," constituting a massive infringement on true awareness.

Well, consider that problem taken to the golf course: You stand over what should be an easy eight-iron to the green with nothing but a pile of do's going through your noggin: e.g. "do this [fill in cerebral concept of a swing component], or last time I did that so I'm going to try this other, or damn I sure don't want to foul up like that drive I just skulled, or (too often in my case) 'man, the world is going to hell in a handbasket and here I am playing golf!'" Literally a thousand variations.

Sound familiar?

In another column (and in the next season) I expect to develop this line of behavior mod; it's too long for this column. In the meantime, maybe the interested golfer can check out the latest golf book by Deepak Chopra. :)

Well, that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

One thing that complicates the struggle for excellence at golf is there are other criteria for success... such as drinking beer and having a good time, enjoying the company.

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Most of us have been at this for a while now: believe it or not the big Six Zero is looming large on the event horizon for us early T.O.U.R. adopters. Fact is from lack of enthusiasm or loss of brain cells it's rare to extend that afterward monkey business that used to get us in so much trouble. Can hardly get a quorum anymore.

Well, a few of us (six)—gray hairs sprouting under the baseball caps—do wander off to swill brewskis and shots at a South Lyon non-corporate bistro. Some semblance of old times, yet we're out of there before rush hour ends.

I'm beginning to feel me and my buds in the provincial golf scene are marking time, mainly providing seed corn for "T.O.U.R. the Next Generation." Like *Star Trek*, it should be an okay series but nothing like the original.

[1] Check out this link in Wikipedia that gives sad description of all the typical poor shots an average golfer makes. By the way, the pros make all of these mistakes as well, only perhaps once a season as opposed to once a hole.

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Golf in the Provinces Part 4|End of Year Scrambles Tournament