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The Grand Old Game

by
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This week's Daily Sun had an article by Steve Trivett wherein he lamented about the frustration associated with the "Grand Old Game" of golf. Reading the column I thought he had been following me around on the course when he talked about missing a 12 inch putt. He threatened to sell his clubs he was so frustrated with the game.... I would bet more than two thirds of us who attempt to play this game have sold our clubs 50 times, only to buy them back when someone calls needing to fill a fourth. What is it about this game? You would think a game that dates back to the 14th – 15th century would have found ways to make it easier wouldn't you?

Scotland is credited with starting the game of golf but according to my close personal sources in St. Andrews they didn't actually invent the game even though they were responsible for developing it to what we know of it today. The earliest known reference to golf came from King Jimmy the 2nd of Scotland when he banned the playing of golf because his archers were playing it rather than practice their skills with the bow. It's reported the next two kings, Jimmy the 3rd and 4th respectively, in 1471 and 1491 re-issued a ban on the game of golf.

The actual name "Golf" probably was derived from Dutch who used to have a game they played by the name of "kolf," which meant "club." Their version was to move some object from here to there using sticks with a curved end and they played it on ice. My good friend Alphons says it gets very cold in Holland and ice is the playing field of choice. Some think this is where hockey came from as well. Anyway, the Scots evolved that word to "golfe" or "goff" and ultimately arrived at what we call it today... "golf", which means *"Ain't no way you gonna hit that little dimpled ball straight."*(My paraphrase.)

This game didn't just grow up overnight. It took centuries for it to twist and turn and it wasn't until 1744 that the Scots dug some holes and put down the first known rules in writing in Edinburgh and established the game in a form which we could easily recognize today. One little known fact, which gives authenticity to the Dutch connection... even though the Scots played their game on dry land rather than ice, they used balls that were acquired in trade from Holland. It was the Scots, however, that dug the hole and made getting the ball into it the object of the game.

Golf reached the United States in 1884 and the USGA was founded in 1894. And if you'll allow me a little bragging space here... America's first golf course was built in beautiful Greenbrier County, WV, in White Sulphur Springs, WV, the home of the beautiful resort The Greenbrier and birthplace of yours truly. A local gentleman farmer and lawyer, Russell Montague built the first golf course on his property and named the course "Oakhurst Links."

It opened in 1884, played approximately 2,235 yards and had holes identified then as 1-shot, 2-shot and 3-shot holes. The “shot” portion of the name indicated the number of strokes it should take to get to the green in regulation. These were the equivalent of our Par 3, Par 4 and Par 5 holes today. My un-impeachable sources tell me the word “par” wasn’t even known at that time. It was some sick person who later incorporated that evil phrase into the game. The Oakhurst Links club has been refurbished to its 19th century splendor and offers an opportunity for those who wish to play the game as it was in 1884, as it originated in Scotland with hickory clubs and authentic Gutta Percha balls. *(A solid core, resin ball that replaced the leather ball filled with feathers.)*

If you think about all the complexities and frustrations of golf you wonder why so many of us still yearn to be out on the course. There is absolutely no one who could ever remember all the little, teeny, tiny things one should know to hit the ball correctly and consistently. I’ve come to the conclusion it is a game with a never achievable goal. We’re always striving to beat ourselves and that ugly person inside each of us apparently practices more than we do because he always wins. This is a game, I’m convinced, that could be mastered if we just remember those three little words everyone always calls out to us after a horrendous smacking of the ball...”You looked up!!!”

But there are some good aspects of the game... if you’re shy and have trouble meeting people just pick up the wrong ball on the golf course. I guarantee a conversation will begin right away.

And there are the simple rules of etiquette that golf courses always follow. Is your round like mine... they always put the slower golfers in front of me and the fast people are always behind me? Why is that?

I took some lessons to learn how to chip and pitch better and mentioned to the Pro who was teaching me that I hoped this would help me take some strokes off my game. After watching me hit after the lessons she told me, “Tom, if strokes off your game was your goal, I’ve got to advise you to just use the eraser.”

I noticed there is a tournament coming up with the goal of “Shoot Your Age.” My problem is I’ll never live long enough to be able to shoot my age. Who’s in favor of a “Shoot Your Weight” tournament... how many could excel in that one???

See you next week folks.

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