

GOLF IN THE PROVINCES^[1], PART 1

The "What's this all about?" phase

This weekend, watching the 2007 US Open golf championship, one of the more brutal contests in the game (where par is an achievement), it occurs to me these men are playing a game "with which I am not familiar."^[2] For one thing, adorning most of their caps and polo shirts are the logos for Bank of Scotland, MetLife, Bearing Point^[3], etc.... sponsors of every global bank, insurance company, or accounting firm primed and ready to purchase a third-world country.

It's true many golf professionals are content with more earthy promotional contracts, say, golf balls and equipment—recall the exceptional multimillion-dollar Nike deal with Tiger Woods before he'd hit his first tee shot as a pro!—but more and more of the elite players sport corporate images. You realize TV golf is not your father's game when your son asks "Dad, what's an 'Arthur Andersen' and can we pick up a dozen at Wal-Mart?"^[4]

I came into my own decidedly nonprofessional and noncorporate game innocently. Roughly 15 short years ago, people at the software firm I worked for would sneak out and play nine holes at a local city course after hours. Attractive young women sometimes joined us; pitchers of beer invariably followed the round. Where do I sign up?

As most American boys growing up in the 50s, I'd played baseball. I was actually a pretty good hitter until they started segregating the pitchers away from practice at the plate. And although some golf instructors claim a golf swing is simply a baseball swing in a different plane, you don't see too many golf professionals stepping into their drives.

In any case, unlearning the baseball swing took a few years. I took some lessons, tried to educate myself one way or the other. Given my literary nature, I spent more time watching golf videos and reading books than the average Joe.

I went to the range when I could and tried to find someone decent who could or would play 18 holes on Saturdays. The best education comes from doing. Brian Dooley, a coworker at the above software firm, was my "someone decent" regularly able to play and tolerant of errancy. Looking back, Brian had the perfect game for mentoring: he played bogey^[5] to my double bogey, he played efficiently, he had a positive mental attitude, and he cracked a brewski every three holes.

Beer and camaraderie in the outdoors. I'm hooked!

And such doings become the essence of the experience of golf for many men.^[6] Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, I wanted more from this communal yet highly individualistic recreational activity that seemed to demand such exacting skill. The joy of a well-executed shot—whether drive, iron, chip, or putt— not to mention the joy of a whole round of such shots surely rivals that of a night of wild sex with a Randian heroine... or even with a stimulating biker chick.

Probably the best popular image of how it feels to strike the ball well comes from Kevin Costner's salty tale, *Tin Cup*. Remember the scene where Roy "Tin Cup" McAvoy (Costner) is giving lessons to his psychologist friend Molly (Rene Russo)? She's chunking them here, shanking them there, struggling, yelling the F-word, about ready to throw the club at Roy, when CRACK!, she all of sudden hits a screamer from the sweet spot. And starts glowing like the Northern Lights.

That's my point. The thrill of being able to do that, to solidly strike and control the ball, becomes the incentive to put in the seat time it takes to do it some more. A positive feedback loop, it affects some as a spiritual calling: they seek this repeated ecstatic elevation of experience from the humdrum.

Well, me, too, with qualification. I've been luckier than most, put in more effort to get better than most, and gotten good enough that the pleasure of good shots outweighs the frustration of poor ones. (Believe me, there isn't much in the world more frustrating than a grossly mishit golf ball.)

The irony is now I'm no longer driven to have to play at every opportunity. It's a good thing, too, because golf is not only time-consuming, it's expensive. I'm satisfied that I finally understand what "this" is all about, and I remain standing after all the frustrations... on a tenuous platform of my own sociological perspective on the game—which I speculate it might be nice to let people in on.

The subsequent two parts deal with key elements of my unique man-on-the-street golf experience: a) the rare opportunity to enjoy the game (and its aftermaths) via a regular weekly foursome and b) the standard company league and golf-resort weekend. Names may be changed to protect the overly sensitive.

[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] This quote is from Bobby Jones, the best golfer of his era, who made the remark about Jack Nicklaus upon Jack's victory at the 1965 Masters. (Jack years later in tribute to Jones applied the same quote to Tiger Woods on the eve of Tiger winning the 2000 PGA Championship.)

[3] Bearing Point, formerly KPMG—it changed its name after the accounting crisis that engulfed the accounting profession in the wake of the Arthur Andersen/Enron corruption scandals—, is one of the largest accounting/investment services firms in the world. Its lawyers and economists provide consulting services to more than 2,000 business and government clients worldwide, including all US federal agencies.

Bearing Point is one of Phil Mickelson's (Phil is one of the leading players, after Tiger woods) biggest sponsors. It generated the blueprint used for control of the Iraqi economy: the so-called 100 Orders implemented by L. Paul Bremer III, Director of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) starting in 2003. These orders coerce Iraqi civilians in numerous ways but, as important, effect a massive Iraqi business-wealth transfer to Authority-designated multinational corporations.

[4] Arguably the favorite pro of the common golf fan, John Daly, deviates quite a bit from the Joe-Corporate image, preferring sponsors such as 84 Lumber and Hooters.

[5] Par is generally 72 strokes for 18 holes. Bogey is a stroke above par, so a bogey round is 90 strokes for 18 holes.

[6] Golf at the level with which I'm familiar is 95% a man's game; it brings to mind a comment from an author of a book on fly fishing to the effect: "Women are not prone to see much of value in what they see as routinely breeding pointless obsessive behavior in men." Also, please accept my commentary's uniquely American provincialism.