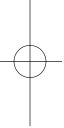




THE GAME

“It All Comes Back to Character”




Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.

—Khalil Gibran

Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.

—Winston Churchill¹



“**G**olf is the closest game to the game we call life. You get bad breaks from good shots; you get good breaks from bad shots—but you have to play the game where it lies.”² So claimed O. B. Keeler, the famed golf writer who, from 1916 to 1930, traveled more than 120,000 miles covering the career of Bobby Jones. We do indeed play the game where it lies. Each day is different, even if the course remains the same, and the challenges are at once maddening and intoxicating. It doesn’t matter if frost covers the ground in winter, if rain water fills the cups on the greens in the spring, or if wind blows sand in our eyes after a bunker shot in the summer. We just love to play.

Walter Simpson, in his 1892 book *The Art of Golf*, seems to understand the golfer’s psyche. He writes that the game “has some drawbacks. It is possible, by too much of it, to destroy the mind.”³ His admonition notwithstanding, true golfers rarely get enough of it. We know that if we

keep plugging along and keep trying, sometimes good things come to us when we least expect them, just as in life.

Golf is a game with incredible staying power, having been played for over five hundred years. Men and women, young and old, royalty and artisans, CEOs and taxi drivers, people with bad backs and creaky knees, amputees and the blind, all play it. A few even play from wheelchairs. What is it that draws people to golf and holds them in its grip until they are too old and feeble to play any longer? The reasons are many. The game engages both body and mind in a very particular way and, some might argue, the soul as well.

James Balfour, who began playing golf in Scotland in the 1840s, explains it this way in *Reminiscences of Golf on St Andrews Links*:

It is a fine, open-air, athletic exercise, not violent, but bringing into play nearly all the muscles of the body. . . . It is a game of skill, needing mind and thought and judgment, as well as a cunning hand. It is also a social game, where one may go out with a friend or with three, and enjoy mutual intercourse. . . . It never palls or grows stale, as morning by morning the players appear at the teeing ground with as keen a relish as if they had never seen a club for a month.⁴

It is a game requiring not only physical skill but also the ability to control our emotions, as we try to beat our best scores each time out, as well as the scores of our friends who join us in the endeavor.

The game is different because the ball must wait for us. It isn't baseball or tennis where a ball comes toward us that we have to react to in a split second. The golf ball just lies there passively, sometimes seeming to taunt us. It's up to us to make it go. "There is no hurry," writes John Low in *Concerning Golf*, rather "we fix our own time, we give ourselves every chance of success." It is this deliberate quality of the game that "makes it so testing to the nerves; for the very slowness which gives us opportunity for calculation draws our nerves out to the highest tension."⁵

Golf certainly can make our stomachs churn and scramble our brains. Mark Twain famously describes it as "a good walk spoiled." In the short space of the 15 minutes or so it takes to play a hole, it's possible to experience a full gamut of emotions—you name it, and it can be felt in a million different combinations. Fear and trepidation of the opening tee shot, followed by joy and relief after a great drive nailed straight down the middle, then consternation at the fat second shot plunked into the

water, and ending with sadness and disappointment as we walk off the green with a triple bogey. The challenges never end.

People are also drawn to golf because it takes them into the great outdoors, to open spaces away from the office. Theodore Arnold Haultain discusses the tactile lure of the course, each with its own personality and varied terrain, in his book *The Mystery of Golf*. Speaking of the delights of the game in 1910, he describes the varied elements that stimulate our senses:

The great breeze that greets you on the hill, the whiffs of air—pungent, penetrating—that come through green things growing, the hot smell of pines at noon, the wet smell of fallen leaves in autumn, the damp and heavy air of the valley at eve, the lungs full of oxygen, the sense of freedom on a great expanse, the exhilaration, the vastness, the buoyancy, the exaltation.⁶

“We live in small spaces,” writes Henry Leach in *The Happy Golfer*, “with many walls and low roofs.”⁷ Away from the city, and its cacophony of angry noises that strangle silence, the golf course provides us with a few hours of refuge. Steaming asphalt and concrete, honking horns, and the incessant buzz and clatter of people coming and going gives way to a quiet oasis of cool grass, green trees, chirping birds, and the smell of pine needles. “A golfer on the links is uplifted to a simpler, freer self,” claims Leach.⁸

Michael Murphy, in his classic book *Golf in the Kingdom*, speaks of golf in terms of “walkin’ fast across the countryside and feelin’ the wind and watchin’ the sun go down and seein’ yer friends hit good shots and hittin’ some yourself. It’s love and it’s feelin’ the splendor o’ this good world.” To David Forgan, who crafted the “Golfer’s Creed” in the late 19th century, golf offers “a sweeping away of mental cobwebs, genuine recreation of tired tissues. . . . It is a cure for care, an antidote to worry.”⁹

As Balfour and Murphy assert, golf is also a social game, one we play with fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends in our Saturday foursome, and even with strangers who join us on the first tee. We may enjoy the park-like setting of the golf course, the competition, and the chitchat, but the most intriguing element of the game is trying to hit that little damn ball where we want it to go. “Without doubt,” writes Haultain, “the ball must be impelled by

muscular movement; how to coordinate that muscular movement—that is the physiological factor in the fascination of golf.”¹⁰

When one considers the physics involved, this is a daunting task. We apply about 32 pounds of muscles to swing a golf club almost 4 feet long in an arc of 20 feet around our body, while shoulders and hips turn, arms move up and down, and 5 separate torques act upon the club.¹¹ All of this motion is focused on making solid contact with a ball 1.68 inches in diameter squarely in the center of a 2-inch-square club face on a path that will propel the ball with sufficient force to send it the correct distance to the target.

The ball is in contact with the face of the club for half a thousandth of a second (as the club travels about three-quarters of an inch), and the margins of error are incredibly slim. If the club face is open or closed just two or three degrees with a driver, the ball will fly 20 yards or more off line, depending on the speed of the swing.¹² Sometimes just hitting the ball at all is a challenge, and a proper club–ball contact that sends the ball straight to our intended target seems a minor miracle. All of these gyrations are produced with one objective: to put that ball in a four-and-a-quarter-inch hole placed in the ground hundreds of yards away. All the while we have to negotiate water hazards, bunkers, trees, and perhaps wind and rain—in addition to our own nerves and tempers.

Yet, in spite of these considerable challenges, on the occasions when things work—by design or divine intervention—and the ball is struck solidly on line, it provides a palpable physical thrill. As the old golf adage goes, “One good shot keeps you coming back.” All the rest, the ones topped in the water or sliced into the woods, are shoved aside, as we choose to revel in our modest successes. “I did it once,” we tell ourselves. “I can surely do it again, even better.” Our minds and muscles drive us, and our memories plug into feelings of how we did it right yesterday, a week ago, or 10 years ago.

Pembroke Vaile, an intriguing and pensive man from the last century, wrote expressively on the “soul” of golf. Among its elusive elements, he claims, is “the sheer beauty of the flight of the ball,” and the almost “sensuous delight which comes to the man who created that beauty, and knows how and why he did it.”¹³

There is something intoxicating in the harmonically pure meeting of club and ball. Ben Hogan, one of the best to ever play the game, loved to practice and hit golf balls from sunup to sundown. He once said that the

perfectly struck shot “goes from the ball, up the club’s shaft, right to your heart.”¹⁴ This is the true essence of what has attracted people to the game for five centuries. For whether it’s a hickory-shafted club from the 1800s or a modern, graphite-shafted, titanium driver, the player still has to execute the shot properly.

Golf is a game that has been called a microcosm of life, as every day offers a new set of challenges. To succeed you must work hard to develop your gifts, possess healthy doses of self-confidence and patience, and persevere when times get tough. Golf has been described as a “self-reliant, silent, sturdy,” game, which “leans less on its fellows” and “loves best to overcome obstacles alone.”¹⁵

Success or failure depends on one person, ourselves. There are no teammates to help us out when things go wrong, and unlike baseball, we have to play our foul balls. To excel at the highest levels, particular and rare talents are required. Not only physical skill but also a strong and resolved character is necessary to overcome the adversity that will undoubtedly come. As Charles Blair Macdonald, one of the founding fathers of American golf, put it in 1898: “No game brings out more unerringly the true character of a man or teaches him a better lesson in self-control.”¹⁶

The people in this book all possessed confidence in their abilities and were dogged in their pursuit of excellence. But without natural talent, they would never have been heard from. Each of us is born into this world with certain gifts, which, if fully exercised, lead us to the life path we are meant to follow. There are different kinds of gifts and different kinds of work, but the same God works those gifts in all men and women.¹⁷ So says the Bible. To express our gifts and build a fulfilling life around them is the highest expression of our true essence.

These champions—all of whom, with the exception of caddy Bruce Edwards, are members of the World Golf Hall of Fame—came from different times and had different backgrounds. None was a perfect human being. They all had their own particular faults and flaws but shared in common a gift for the game of golf. This is what defined them, just as our gifts define us. Horton Smith, winner of two Masters Tournaments, claims that “golfing genius strikes seldom. . . . It can be developed but before a man is a genius at golf, he must have within him a spark that is the gift of the Almighty.”¹⁸ Over a century ago, three-time British Open champion Bob Ferguson echoed the same sentiment as he claimed that

nerve, enthusiasm, and practice are the three essentials to succeed in golf. But to be great, he asserted, requires the gift.

It is this unique and branded *gift* that set the truly great above all the rest. The men in this book—Harry Vardon, Bobby Jones, Ben Hogan, Charlie Sifford, Ken Venturi, and Bruce Edwards—and the woman—Babe Didrikson Zaharias—all had gifts they exercised freely and rigorously, never squandering them, even when circumstances might have forgiven them for fading away quietly.

They never quit, even when things looked bleak. Bobby Jones claims that golf “is the most rewarding of all games because it possesses a very definite value as a molder or developer of character.”¹⁹ It was character that guided these people’s lives and girded them against persistent struggles in the face of adversity that threatened their very lives.

Harry Vardon was at the peak of his game when struck down with tuberculosis, but he resolved to play on, winning two more British Opens and acting as a mentor to promising new players; Bobby Jones was stricken with a rare and debilitating spinal disease that would confine him to a wheelchair when he was still a young man, but he kept building the Masters Tournament, writing about golf, and being an ambassador for the game; Ben Hogan nearly died in a car crash that permanently damaged his body and caused him chronic pain for the rest of his days, but he came back and won six more major championships and built a company bearing his name.

Babe Didrikson Zaharias was struck down by colon cancer but wouldn’t quit. She became a spokesperson for the American Cancer Society and was an inspiration to fellow sufferers, especially after winning another U.S. Women’s Open before the cancer returned; Charlie Sifford was the victim of incessant racism, which included harassment and death threats, but he never bowed and was a winner at the highest levels of the game, paving the way for the likes of Tiger Woods.

Ken Venturi lost his game after a car accident, and later to carpal tunnel syndrome, but would capture the U.S. Open in some of the most trying conditions the championship ever produced and later have a successful broadcasting career; Bruce Edwards was afflicted with ALS, or “Lou Gehrig’s disease,” but kept going and inspired people with his fight, carrying the bag for one final major victory with boss Tom Watson before succumbing to his illness. What kept them going? They all loved the game. It was what they did.

“However mean your life is, meet it and live it.”²⁰ These words of Henry David Thoreau could describe the lives of all the people in this book, who faced tremendous physical and emotional trials in their lives, yet persevered and overcame. The strength and resilience of the human spirit—indeed, its stubborn persistence—was a common denominator in facing their struggles. Golf can be a vexing and cruel game and teaches us much about ourselves.

Golf has been described as “a contest, a duel, or a melee, calling for courage, skill, strategy and self-control. It is a test of temper, a trial of honor, a revealer of character.” Jerome Travers, the great amateur of the early 20th century, believed the character of an individual is laid bare under “the microscope of golf influence. The good and bad qualities in our make-up are exposed to view under the spell which golf casts over man.”²¹ In the end, as with most of life, our success hinges on the character and spirit we possess.

How would our tempers be tested if we were struck down by a serious illness, a near-fatal accident, or some career-threatening injury from which we would never fully recover? How would our honor be preserved if we had people telling us we were washed-up, unwanted, and persona non grata on the golf course?

How would our character be revealed if Lou Gehrig’s disease robbed us of the ability to walk and talk?

How would we face the fear? Would we give in to self-pity or persevere and keep going? Where would we find the strength to actually carry on with our careers with any measure of success?

The people in this book displayed their character vigorously by not giving up or giving in to the suffering that afflicted them. This is not a chronicle of the tournaments they won and lost but an examination of how they applied their gifts and pushed themselves to achieve success. Champion golfers have been identified as sharing certain qualities, among them tough-mindedness, confidence, self-sufficiency, and emotional stability: all of which provide players with the armor to press on when things look hopeless.²² The very nature of the game prepares one for adversity and rewards a persevering spirit that doesn’t accept surrender without a fight.

The stories of these champions not only bear witness to their courage and discipline but also to the love and support of family and friends who helped them. As Robert Tyre Jones, grandfather of Bobby Jones, claimed,

“No man ever accomplishes anything really worthwhile alone. There are always two additional forces at work—other people and Providence.”²³ Their families and friends bolstered them, but the game itself offered them refuge and therapy for both body and mind when they were suffering.

In recent years, *Golf Digest* magazine has featured a series called *Golf Saved My Life*, which focuses on this therapeutic side of the game. Whether the men and women telling their stories have struggled with cancer, autism, bipolar disorder, or serious injuries brought on by war or accidents, they all reveal how the game has helped give renewed purpose to their lives.

This theme is nothing new. In 1965, *Golf Journal* ran the story of a James Ranni, 62 years old at the time, who had suffered a major stroke years earlier. The neurosurgeon who saved his life was a golfer and saw the game as a therapeutic measure to help patients overcome serious handicaps and regain health. As for Ranni, he claimed that when people spoke of “how close you can get to God on a golf course,” he knew exactly what they meant. “I can’t tell you how important it is to me to be an example of what golf can do in rehabilitating the disabled.”²⁴

The National Amputee Golf Association was formed in 1954 in response to World War II veterans who were returning home with missing limbs and who wanted to get back into the game. It has followed the motto, “It’s not what you’ve lost, but what you have left that counts.” Bert Shepard, who lost his right leg in World War II, spoke to *Golf World* in 1997. People claimed he had “the guts to go out and play golf and all that. What about some credit to the game of golf? I’ve seen guys who never got out of the house get fascinated with golf, and it changes their lives.”²⁵

The Salute Military Golf Association (SMGA) has positively impacted the lives of thousands of post-9/11 servicemen and servicewomen, as nearly 2,500 wounded warriors have been exposed to golf through the SMGA’s programs. Many of them have spoken of the healing nature of the game, how it has helped them escape the dark days and given them a feeling of hope. Tim Lang, who lost a portion of his right leg in Iraq in 2006, is proof of that. “I would tell people who have physical handicaps who don’t think they can play golf,” he explained to *USA Today* in 2011, “that there are no limitations. To me, there are two types of people who

have suffered a life-changing experience—ones who won't let anything stop them, and ones who will find any excuse to not do anything."²⁶

This attitude of not letting anything stop you and doing the best with what you have left was certainly exemplified a hundred years ago by a man named Thomas McAuliffe. In spite of losing both arms in a horrible accident when he was nine years old, he learned to play golf. In 1915, the 22-year-old told his story to *Golf Monthly*. By gripping the club between his cheek and shoulder, and with a "combined swing and jerk of the body and shoulder," he was able to hit the ball 100 to 120 yards with a driver.

McAuliffe was certainly a positive thinker. "I never permit the thought of my accident to take possession of my mind," he declared, "nor do I think of anything being impossible for me to overcome. When the time comes, I just go ahead as best I may, and somehow, somehow, I generally get there without any great difficulties."²⁷

Somehow, somehow, I generally get there without any great difficulties—this understatement of courageous determination and resolve is a common thread in the stories of Vardon, Jones, Hogan, Zaharias, Sifford, Venturi, and Edwards. The game was not only their livelihood but also a soothing therapy for them, as it has been for others not so famous.

Character is hard to measure, but it is evident in those who persevere, who believe they can and will overcome whatever hardships are placed in front of them. Golf is a test, Arnold Haultain claims, "not so much of the muscle, or even of the brain and nerves of a man," as it is a test of his or her innermost self . . .

of his soul and spirit; of his whole character and disposition; of his temperament; of his habit of mind; of the entire content of his mental and moral nature . . . it is a physiological, psychological, and moral fight with yourself; it is a test of mastery over self.²⁸

What is there to learn from the challenges these golfers faced and how they overcame them? Why should we care? Haultain once again offers insight: "In a picture, a sonata, a statue—the color, the sound, the form assuredly may interest us," but these "are but vehicles for the artist's thought and emotion." He continues:

It is the artist's conception of life that is so interesting. So it is with sport. We like immensely to know exactly how a man boxes or fences or drives; *but underneath this, we like immensely to know how he*

fights the battle of life; for he will do the one as he does the other—that we feel [italics added]. So there is a great kinship between artist and sportsman. Each reveals himself in his work; and it is in this self-revelation that humanity takes an absorbing interest.²⁹

For those who have the gift of golf, we wonder what it is that makes them special. This is especially true when they triumph over adversity that could just as well crush them. How do they deal with victory and defeat, both on and off the course?

The stories of the people I discuss here are connected, in more than a casual way, to each other by the game. Consider Harry Vardon, the greatest player of his era, who knew Old Tom Morris and played with Bobby Jones in the latter's first U.S. Open in 1920. He told reporters the young Jones would be one of the very best golfers ever seen, and he was right.

After Jones retired from competition, he played a 1934 exhibition in Houston attended by Babe Zaharias, an event she claimed "fired up" her own golf aspirations. That same year, Jones started the Masters Tournament, which Ben Hogan won twice. Jones used to say that if he had to choose one man to hit a shot to win a major championship, he would pick Hogan because of his "spiritual" assets.³⁰ Hogan, late in his career, saw a tenacity in Ken Venturi that he admired and took him under his wing. They became great friends, and Ken was a pallbearer at Hogan's funeral.

Venturi befriended Charlie Sifford in those days when racism dogged him. When the restaurant at the Pensacola Country Club wouldn't let Charlie eat there, Venturi spoke up, then took his own breakfast and joined Charlie in the locker room to eat. Bruce Edwards worked for Tom Watson, who was tutored by Byron Nelson, the same man who had helped Ken Venturi years earlier. The first tournament Edwards and Watson won together was the Byron Nelson Classic. Amazingly, the chain of golf history is often connected by one or two short links.

The talent of the seven people in this book, in concert with their character, defined lives that are remembered to this day. When golf icon Old Tom Morris died over a hundred years ago, his achievements as a golfer were well known and sure to endure. The greatest moral of his life, as stressed upon his passing, was that "no matter in what sphere, it is character that achieves the greatest victories." As Arnold Haultain writes plainly, "It all comes back to character; not intellect or acumen or ability . . . just character."³¹

In many ways, the legacy of how these champions dealt with the physical and emotional trials life handed them is more impressive than the records they set on the golf course. “We define and admire greatness,” writes Mark Frost in his wonderful book *The Greatest Game Ever Played*, “not only by the magnitude of achievement but also for the degree of difficulty that person has to overcome.”³²

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