



Golf With My Dog

Why can't I play it in the United States of America? BY MICHAEL KONIK

GOLF IN America has a serious problem. So troubling is this problem that many players—including me — are thinking of quitting the game. Or, in our saner moments, of playing far less than usual.

Well, at least I am. That's how dismayed I've become.

Ladies and gentlemen, Man ought to be allowed to play golf with his Best Friend—without fear of persecution, prosecution or discrimination. That seems reasonable and right, doesn't it?

Here in Litigation Land, apparently not. There is almost nowhere in the United States open to the public where I am welcome to play golf in the company of my dog.

Others may fret about nonconforming drivers and rising greens fees and the near-omnipresence of power carts compromising the essential wonder of our Royal & Ancient game. (I do, too.) But at the moment, I am chiefly concerned with why I cannot spend four hours of transcendently pleasurable time outside in a park full of grass and birds and delicious smells with my beloved Ella Guinevere Konik.

Ella is better-behaved than most children, not to mention the majority of quick-tempered hackers. Ella is more appreciative of the great outdoors than the average asphalt-loving weekend golfer speeding through the wilderness in his motorized buggy. And, I must humbly report, there is no one in the world Ella would rather spend an afternoon with than your sod-chunking correspondent.

I feel likewise about her.

Yet every time I depart for the golf course, I am compelled to leave her at home, to "guard the house," rather than take her to join me on a nice long walk.

Various course owners and city park employees and other stewards of the playing grounds have explained the reasons for dog discrimination to me. (Keyword: lawsuits.) Rather than systematically explain why all these preposterous "reasons" are just a load of divots—I mean, what's more dangerous, my perfectly behaved dog or a 36-handicapper with a beer in one hand and an oversized driver in the other?—I will bite my tongue and say only this: If well-trained dogs are good enough for a little old place called St. Andrews in Scotland, I figure they're good enough for golf courses in the United States of America.

That's right: Dogs are allowed to accompany their owners on the Old Course, the most sacred plot of golf land on the planet. But just try bringing your all-white-with-peach-colored-ears greyhound-Lab mix to, say, a county parks course in Los Angeles. You might as well be carrying an Uzi.

The Grass Office: Las Vegas

The newest golf course in Las Vegas—and at present the only one on the famed "Strip"—is, like most everything else in this land of make-believe, an elaborate fake. But what a magnificent forgery it is. **Bali Hai Golf Club** (5160 Las Vegas Boulevard South; 702-450-8000; www.waltersgolf.com) is a tropical wonderland of towering palm trees, glittering lagoons and Polynesian accouterments. Not since Shadow Creek has Vegas—or the United States, for that matter—seen such an enjoyable playground emerge from what was once a desert. And Bali Hai offers startling views of Vegas' castle, pyramid and Eiffel Tower, fake of course, which look particularly attractive on "some enchanted evening." **Greens fee:** \$250–\$300.—*M.K.*

You see dogs all over the courses of Scotland—and Wales and Ireland and England—and no one complains. The presence of happy dogs on the course seems to add to every player's enjoyment of the game. On my last two visits to St. Andrews, I have been delighted to meet an older English gentleman, a member of the Royal & Ancient Golf Club, who tours these links with two black Labbies, sans leash. They sit patiently beside the tee markers when their human companions are hitting, heel down the fairway when the players make their way toward the green and bound off into the rough when given permission. You can hardly tell who is jollier, the dogs or their master.

Dozens of furry friends take their evening constitutionals along the public footpaths crisscrossing the golf turf of St. Andrews. And dozens more enjoy bounding through the high gorse, vainly chasing Scottish hares the size of beagles. One good old boy, Zac, a German shepherd, was able to find and operate all the water fountains on the courses. His owner,

John, recalls that a big advantage of playing with Zac was that this talented dog could track a mis-hit shot along the ground and indicate with his nose where the errant ball was hiding. He was not trained in this skill as a pup, but over the years he developed a habit of sniffing out golf balls in the long rough or in the bushes. John started to reward him for each find with a biscuit, and eventually there were many evenings when the duffer dad had to hope Zac would not discover any more wayward pellets, since every pocket on his golf bag was filled with reclaimed pearls.

A year ago, John had to have old Zac put to sleep. "I have already been back golfing in St. Andrews this year," John wrote me recently, struggling to maintain the British stiff upper lip, "and I found that I missed him more than I would have thought."

My Ella is now 8 years old, or 56 in dog years. She has had a good life, swimming in the Pacific, hiking in the Cascades, kissing various celebrities in Hollywood. I fear the day when I will have to say goodbye to her. She has seen me through a divorce and much brokenheartedness, and she has never questioned my failures as a golfer or a man. (Nor has she had much opinion on my triumphs.) Ella asks only that I play with her and escort her beyond our yard and let her be my sweetest friend. As she grows older, her eagerness to chase squirrels up trees—yes, she can, among myriad amazing stunts, truly climb a tree—seems to be diminishing, and the frequency of her naps seems to be increasing. But one thing never changes: Ella would rather be with her silly ol' dad than without him.

Since he works from a home office, she is somewhat spoiled in this regard. Yet I feel growing pangs of guilt and remorse every time I leave my faithful hound in favor of the golf course. There is not a round I play during which I don't at some point think, "How Ella would love to be here, nose to the ground, tail in the air, joy in her smart brown eyes!" It's then that I particularly dislike golf in America.

Several years ago, my pal Tony played golf at The Homestead in Hot Springs, Virginia, with no less an eminence than Sam Snead. During the round, Snead didn't say much to his playing companion, but he kept up a running "conversation" with a handsome golden retriever who never left his side. ("Got all of that one, didn't I, boy?") Afterward, Snead talked plenty (over a few cool libations). He said that he brought his dog with him often now, because "you never know what kind of people you're going to get hooked up with on the course. But I know I like my dog."

I like my dog, too. (OK, I adore her.) But since I'm neither The Slammer nor the despotic owner of an exclusive club where I make the rules, canine-related or otherwise, I'm forced to choose between golf and my mutt. That's a choice that no decent person ought to have to make.

Recently I asked some of my colleagues in the golf business if they could recommend anywhere that Ella (and her dad) might be welcomed for a salutary round. Not one could recall a public venue where dogs are encouraged. A few knew of private clubs where the pro or superintendent brought his pup onto the course—for example, Sand Hills Golf Club, the "found" primal masterpiece in Mullen, Nebraska. Is it merely a coincidence that the closest thing America has to "Scottish golf" also shares the admirable Scottish attitude toward hounds?

The best I've been able to come up with in my neighborhood is a surreal little park called the Armand Hammer Pitch-and-Putt, in Bel-Air, California. It lies below Aaron Spelling's baronial estate and less than a well-struck 2-iron from the fringes of the Los Angeles Country Club practice range, where dogs, not to mention most humans, are most definitely not invited. At the Pitch-and-Putt, as long as she's on a leash, Ella is allowed to walk beside me as I hit 30-yard lob wedges to the Volkswagen-size greens. It's not really golf, but it's not enforced separation from my loyal mutt, either. I get to work on my short game; Ella gets to sniff some exotic turf. I get to three-putt from 12 feet; Ella gets to lick her daddy's face when he falls to his knees in mock anguish.

We get to chase a little white ball around. Together. It's at these moments I suspect Ella might love the game of golf as much as her best friend. ➡

Michael Konik is Ella's dad, Sky's golf columnist and author of Nice Shot, Mr. Nicklaus (Huntington Press). He and Sky invite you to share your doggie golf stories by e-mailing them to DeltaSkygolfer@aol.com.