



Alacrity and Demeanor

Lack these two virtues and you don't deserve to step onto a golf course. BY MICHAEL KONIK

A DEAR FRIEND recently took up the game of golf, despite the warnings of many reasonable and caring acquaintances who told him he was surely headed up (and then down) a slippery, Sisyphean slope. Golf, they told him, is the heroin of sports: It will alternately make you feel ecstasy and agony, and it's almost impossible to quit. Be warned, those who knew counseled my friend, you are traveling upon a road that never returns home.

My friend, experienced players would vouch, was voluntarily playing a game that was difficult to learn, practically impossible to master and just seductive enough that he would spend many of his remaining years in a comically futile pursuit of competence.

Better to take up tennis, they urged. Or knitting, perhaps. Less frustrating.

I did not concur—with the tennis part, that is. Yes, I told my friend, golf is frustrating and elusive and powerfully addictive. But that is not why we play the game.

We play golf for most of the usual reasons one plays any sport: competition and challenge and exercise. But we also play for less-quantifiable purposes: introspection and serenity and boon companionship. We play for the magic.

Or we should. The problem is, when the heart and mind and soul are not in perfect alignment—which is nearly always—it's easy to lose sight of what matters about playing golf. We become wrapped up in shooting a score, in striking the ball as well as we did the week before, in hitting it better and farther and truer. In looking good. And inevitably, we are disappointed. Yes, as Shivas Irons, the mystical Scottish hero of Golf in the Kingdom, says, there is no point in playing golf if you don't keep score, if you do not constantly measure yourself against yourself. But the point in keeping score, a true and honest score, is not to highlight one's imperfections; it's to highlight one's improvements.

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Shortly before I commenced to play a round with my friend new to the game, I told him that he might want to keep score for himself, merely as a reference, a starting point from which to gauge his progress. But, I informed him, I would not be judging his golf game on

the merits of his scorecard. His success or failure as a golfer, I told him, would be the product of two essential attributes, neither of which had any relation to being under or over par:

Alacrity and demeanor.

The alacrity with which you play the game and the demeanor you maintain while doing so, I said. These are the hallmarks by which I measure the composition of a golfer's character.

I don't care if you make quintuple-bogey on every hole. Play efficiently and play pleasantly, I told my friend, and I will think you're a terrific success at this silly and wonderful game. Play for the joy of being outside in a beautiful park with a companion who treasures your camaraderie. Relish the game's difficulties; do not brood over them. Meet your small triumphs—a crisply struck iron, a drive that finds the fairway, a putt that rolls just where you wanted it to roll—with gleeful appreciation. Meet your expected failures with graceful equanimity. Struggle with dignity. And do it without inconveniencing all the other strugglers waiting to play behind you.

Do all that, I told him, and I will consider you a magnificent golfer. And I will look forward to the pleasure of playing with you for many years to come.

My perspective on these matters, I had to confess, came from the experience of failure: Early on in my golf

career, I was a rotten player. And by “rotten,” I do not mean a bad scorer. (That goes without saying.) I mean I was a player who would interminably study a 10-foot putt from 14 different angles, all to win a grape soda from my childhood buddy. I would stand forever over iron shots, agonizing about “swing mechanics” for what must have seemed like hours to my patient comrades. I was a player who did not practice regularly, yet would throw his clubs in disgust when he played like someone who does not practice regularly. A player who would sulk over missed shots. Who would pout. And whine. In short, an altogether unpleasant, miserable golfer who excused his bad behavior on the spurious grounds of “being competitive.”

I am older now, and a wee bit wiser. And though I occasionally have my shameful moments, I am a far better golfer. My scores are a little better, too.

HAPPILY, I HAVE seen in others the correlation between a good demeanor and good scores. Jim, my regular playing partner in Los Angeles, was, when I met him, a club-throwing, curse-muttering cloud of bitterness. Sure, he could hit the ball a mile, and when all the cylinders of his game were firing in concert, he could bring our local course to its knees. But when things went slightly awry—a missed putt, a heavy wedge—Jim turned ugly. And he was no fun to play with. And he knew it.

After several empty threats to quit the game, Jim had a therapeutic talk with his wife, which, from what I gathered, was chiefly about putting things in perspective and behaving like a grown man, about playing golf for enjoyment, not self-inflicted pain. Jim still hits the ball a mile, but now he manages his demeanor as well as his swing, and he has edited temper-related double-bogeys from his scorecard. The guy plays great, and he’s fun to play with.

In Scotland, where they know a thing or two about the game, slow play does not exist, because it is not tolerated. I have never played a round there, morning or afternoon, that took more than 3 1/2 hours. And I have never felt rushed. Once, while I was searching for a wayward ball in the heather grass at Royal Dornoch, another group played right through, barreling past while I took two minutes or so to find my elusive orb. There was nothing acrimonious about this moment, no scowling glares or grumbled epithets, merely the tacit understanding that one either plays on or gives way.

Imagine such a scenario at your local muni course, where 25-handicappers take six practice swings, chunk their shot 40 yards, take two or three post-debacle practice swings, sulk disconsolately to their ball, and repeat the routine for an endless six hours. I do not begrudge people playing bad golf; we all start out (and sometimes finish) playing badly. It is no sin to take 9s and 10s on most holes; it is unforgivable, though, to do so slowly. Make whatever score you can, I counseled my friend, but do it without delay.

Slow play and quick tempers ruin a good round of golf more surely than a torrential thunderstorm. It is time, I suggested to my friend, that beginning players stop concerning themselves with swing plane and weight shift and reverse pivots. Kind instructors who really want to impart golf lessons that will last a lifetime should teach their students not how to strike their ball as well as Tom Watson, say, but to play with the man’s noble spirit.

I choose Watson as an example of one to emulate—and there are many—for the cheerful determination he has shown these past few years when his ball-striking has been as sublime as ever and his putting, especially from 4 to 6 feet, has been atrocious. While I don’t care for some of Mr. Watson’s off-course self-righteousness, his on-course demeanor, while serious, is lighthearted and inspiring. Plagued by inscrutable problems with his putter, Watson has never once, as far as I know, thrown a club, shouted a curse or growled icily at his caddie. He merely plays on. And refuses to pout. And when all does go well—as at the 1996 Memorial tournament—he allows a broad, unguarded smile to brighten his boyish face, displaying for all the world the joy of getting it right.

On the other hand, we have the unspeakably talented Tiger Woods. Now, Mr. Woods, it has been noted widely, is in many senses a role model, a groundbreaking, stereotype-shattering trailblazer. He hits the ball far and shoots record scores and wins major tournaments. He is a winner.

The Grass Office Los Angeles

The masterful George C. Thomas Jr. designed the Riviera, Bel-Air and Los Angeles country clubs, the three best golf courses in L.A., which are also consistently ranked among America’s top 100 courses by Golf Magazine. Good luck getting a tee time at any of these highly restrictive private clubs, let alone a membership. If you’d like to sample some of Thomas’ architectural genius without coughing up a six-figure initiation fee for one of the Big Three, avail yourself of the municipally owned **Wilson Golf Course in Griffith Park** (4730 Crystal Springs Drive; 323-663-2555). Admittedly, the conditions there don’t quite measure up to a country club groomed to perfection for celebrities, but they’re not bad, and the unspoiled setting—a tree-filled park adjacent to the L.A. Zoo—does the weary heart good. (You might recognize the view from the first tee as the site of the original “I am Tiger Woods” commercial.) At nearly 7,000 yards from the tips, Wilson is no pitch-and-putt; it has hosted scores of Los Angeles City Champion-ships, including one some years ago won by a young guy named Corey Pavin. And the best part of this tremendous golf course? How little it costs to play. Greens fee: \$12–\$25, plus cart (\$21).—*M.K.*

Tiger Woods, however, is not at present the kind of golfer we should be encouraging our children and friends to be.

First, he plays slowly. (He has been fined for this—at the 1997 Bay Hill Invitational, for instance; at this year's PGA Championship he was “put on the clock” for slow play.) Second, when all does not go exactly as he wishes, he pouts and mopes and even curses—even when he is leading the Masters or the U.S. Open by a jillion shots. To be sure, Bobby Jones, whose legacy as a gentleman is unparalleled, began his storied career as a fiery, obnoxious time bomb who tore up his scorecard at the 1921 British Open in a fit of pique and refused to enter a score. One man's opinion: At the moment, Tiger Woods, whose legend on the links may one day rival Jones', is not setting a good example. And I wish to suggest that there are additional, loftier targets on which he might try to focus. Like the ones my friend concentrated on during his inaugural nine.

My friend shot a bundle with me the day he took up the game. But he did so with alacrity.

He hit all manner of chunks, skulls, shanks, slices, hooks and pop-ups. But he did so with even temper.

He did not fret or rant or complain. He almost never commented on the quality of his play. He talked instead of the regal hawks flying overhead, the smell of the grass, the balm of the sunshine. He enjoyed the day.

And that is why I look forward to my next round of golf with this man. That is why I am proud to call him my friend. 🍷

Michael Konik's latest book, Nice Shot, Mr. Nicklaus (Huntington Press), is a collection of his best golf articles, including this one.