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The Reason for Plaid

Christopher DiTomo

At least three dozen men in my neighborhood have been reborn on the vast well-kept grasslands of a golf course. Their lives have taken on an expanded meaning from the time of their very first swing. Something happens to them. They are overcome with a new sense of vitality, the old become young once more, the belittled and ignored have every whim answered, and everyday men become truly godlike. They become golfers. Many underestimate the game's complexity, but golf has a greater meaning. It is not merely a common sport played simply for pleasure, it is a gateway to fantasy, a respite from the monotony of everyday life, a source of adventure, and an escalation of one's very identity.

Golf, and the men who play golf, can seem quite peculiar to the outside observer. Yet the reasons for this peculiarity exist not in the game itself. The rules themselves are basically simple. The objective is clear and elementary: to place the ball in the hole in the most direct (if not the quickest) manner, with the fewest strokes. This is to be done over the course of eighteen holes. The fewer the strokes, the better the score. It's just that simple. The equipment consists solely of a set of distinct clubs, each with a head shaped or angled differently for the various placements of the ball. Add to this a few "natural" obstacles such as sand-traps, ponds, and the trees on either side which constitute the "rough," and the game is complete. Golf is relatively simple. There is no absurd element of danger, no incredible stretch of the human body's limits, nor any noticeably bizarre objective which can mark a sport as truly strange or fascinating. It is not, in this respect, like bullfighting, marathon running, or logrolling. In fact, to many golf is just a boring sport which often tends to go unnoticed, something one never thinks about. What could possibly account, then, for golf's peculiarity.

If it is not the basic elements that make the game of golf so oddly intriguing, then it must be the strange behaviors and customs of the golfers themselves and the true, deeper nature of the game.

The sport of golf has appealed to many. In fact, never has a sport so slow-paced, so physically undemanding, so apparently heart-stoppingly dull, captured the hearts of so many American men. While so many major sports including baseball, football, and basketball, have been primarily reduced to spectator sports enjoyed vicariously by the common enthusiast from their favorite easy chair amidst the blue neon glow of the television, golf has remained much more appealing to actively participate in than to watch. There is something in the nature of the game, something that appeals to a player's sense of self worth, which makes it so compelling that it must be experienced first hand.

Yet many feel inclined to ask why golf appeals generally to a certain group of people. Those most enthralled with the game tend to be wealthy enough to afford either membership in a private club or the free time to play golf on a regular basis. Golf is obviously far more popular in suburbs and wealthier neighborhoods than in the inner-city, for example. This very socioeconomic distinction goes far toward understanding the appeal golf has for many individuals.

The basic nature of the game of golf holds many positive psychological reinforcements which appeal directly to such financially distinguished persons. One such psychological benefit is that it satisfies the need to heighten one's already high sense of self worth. Is the entire game of golf no more than a matter of simple ego inflation? Not necessarily, but there are many aspects of golf which serve the golfer's need for self-importance. Not many sports require such an immense area for a playing field, and the very idea that large portions of the most finely kept, beautifully picturesque land available are reserved solely for the golfer and his game gives him quite a different perspective.

The psychological benefits are not limited to increasing the golfer's self-esteem and sense of importance alone. The game of

golf also provides a private world of adventure, an escape from the mundane normalities of the typical business day. The world and all its problems momentarily stop for the golfer and his game. One can imagine golfers as envisioning themselves in the medieval time period. This form of escapism leads a man to a time when no mundane moment existed in life. A man was respected, honored, noticed, and served. Every day was an exciting challenge to prove one's mastery over his fellow man. The golfer's generally high status of businessman, lawyer, or dentist transcends to that of an honorable and gallant knight in a medieval world of enticement and excitement.

The caddie provides the first example of the sense of self importance which the truly zealous golfer may crave. The caddie could be seen as the trustworthy servant, the lowly serf, the slave which knowingly walks head down, hunched under the burden of the golf bag, at all times a few paces behind his master. The very idea of having a caddie seems, for the most part, to serve no other purpose but to display social prominence and thus heighten the golfer's sense of self worth. Caddies should have become obsolete with the advent of the golf cart. Golf bags are not extremely heavy and, for those interested in a healthy walk, it seems nonsensical to deploy another person merely to carry a golf bag. One of the numerous assigned duties of the caddie is to hand the golfer the desired club. The club itself represents the weapon. Various weapons serve an array of challenging situations, and part of what makes up a man's cunning and prowess is his ability to select with prudence and conviction the correct one. The golfer's clubs act as his implements of mastery, to be studied and controlled so as to aid him most effectively in his battle.

Golf is not merely man against himself, or the course, or the score; it is a battle of honor between himself and another golfer.

And on a larger scale, it is a battle to maintain or heighten his own reputation among the larger group. Status is easily identifiable in the golfing community, it is measured by the golfer's handicap. Handicap is the average number of strokes over par (the ideal score) a golfer scores on each outing. Golfers tend to size up the kind of a man another golfer is by his handicap. Nearly as important as talent and ability is the golfer's sense of honor. Unlike sports such as football and basketball, in golf the truly admirable competitor is not to loudly boast nor carry himself in a manner that is in any way undignified. Deceitfulness or common "cheating" is shunned. Honor even transcribes to very explicit codes of behavior. This system of etiquette, including specifics on where to stand on the fairway, when to allow another to play through, and order of play on the green, consists of manners to be learned and adhered to, just as the worthy knight must adhere to the rules of chivalry. Those who obey rules of etiquette and standards of dress and demeanor are many times accepted into the community as classy or "noble" golfers. The rogues are those who golf in torn jeans, excessively use profanity, and sneak onto the public golf course.

Even such seemingly minute details as the golfer's fashion of dress must be taken into consideration. As in Medieval fashion, the clothes tend to be outrageously colorful and highly ornate, another demonstration of a golfer's need to be noticed. Some golfers subscribe to a particular color of choice for "battle day." My father, for instance, would wear only black on tournament days, as it had some particularly mysterious significance to him. In the language of the Arthurian legends, he might be described as the "black knight."

In general, a very regal or elitist element seems to pervade the game of golf. Excess is as much part of the game as the basic equipment or the standardized rules. From the curious existence of caddies and halfway houses full of beer and other such indulgences, to

the pomp of high stakes tournaments and posh dinner banquets, the game of golf serves to pamper its player. In a world full of stress and starkly unimpressive reality, the game of golf materializes any assumptions, wishes, and desires its player possesses. It makes real, if for only a short time, the ideal world and the ideal self image which exists, normally, in one's dreams.

After Thought: If you are curious as to why I focused this study on the peculiar behaviors of the male golfer, you must understand the purity and sacredness that the game of golf possesses in the eyes of the men who play it. Men, as compared to women, are typically more consumed by competition. Thus all competitive sports tend to captivate men to a greater degree. In addition, one's ability and tact on the golf course could also be the main criteria for a successful business deal or job interview. Male corporate elites relate both sports and business prowess with other males. Thus, men (unjustly) have greater access to the executive world and it is men, more than women, who define themselves on the golf course in this way. The manner in which a golfer handles pressure, strategy, loss, and gain is a reflection of how well he would maneuver in a male-dominated business world. The existence of gender stratification explains why women are excluded from both the patriarchal social and business spheres as well as the private golf clubs (a woman's membership is most easily attained through her husband). The adherence to women's rights on the golf course will only follow their rightful recognition in society. Awaiting this moment, unfortunately, may take greater patience than the longest 18 rounds of golf imaginable.