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4-1-1992

Golf as a Spiritual Exercise

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Published version. *The Priest*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (April 1992). [Publisher link](#). © 1992 Our Sunday Visitor Society. Used with permission.

Golf as a Spiritual Exercise

Golf is not like other sports. There are not really any teams. Just as all of us have to make our own way in life, so all of us play our individual round of golf, pitting our skill against the course. Just as the course of life is never identical for any two people, and every life is full of surprises, so no two golf courses are the same, so that each new course has its own surprises, pleasant and unpleasant.

Like Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a round of golf can often seem like a descent down the nine circles of Hell and/or an ascent to God through the nine spheres of the heavens. For centuries spiritual writers such as St. Bonaventure have compared life to a trip toward God. Others speak of the journey as climbing a ladder (St. John Climachus), making an ascent (St. Robert Bellarmine) or climbing a mountain (St. John of the Cross). Golf is all of these: There are real hills to climb but also the spiritual surmounting of our own limitations.

Agree to nine holes

Today my partners are three other priests. We are veterans of many rounds together, and as we change our shoes, we agree that it will be only nine holes, not our usual eighteen, since two of us have to get back for appointments.

Hole 1, par 4, 390 yards: Wonderful! There is nobody in sight ahead of our foursome. The sun is shining, and the course is in marvelous shape. What a wonderful day. I need a break from the routine and pressure of work, from the city and its bricks, concrete and the noise of autos. The bumper sticker "*Better a bad day on a golf course than a good day at work*" may be a half truth, but it makes a point. We need our breaks, and the busier we are the more we need them.

When I step up to the first tee, I leave my work and worries behind, O

Lord, but I do not leave You behind. You are always with me. As St. Patrick prayed: "*Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me. . .*" Even on a golf course, especially on a golf course. My elation is heightened by my play: a straight drive, a three wood ten yards short of the green, a good chip and a six-foot putt for a par. "*God, how good you are to your servant.*"

'Gentle Gorilla'

Hole 2, par 5, 490 yards. I love par 5 holes. I rarely reach them in two shots anymore. My 56 years have taken their toll, but today I got close with two woods, knocked my wedge within 15 feet and sank the putt. I'm one under par — what a start! My three companions start well too. Father Rod Smolinski, a local pastor, is only 40 and stands six-four. Our nickname for him is the "Gentle Gorilla." But size rarely matters in golf — many NFL linemen outweigh Ben Hogan and Gary Player combined. Smolinski is very long off the tees and regularly beats the rest of us by 10 strokes.

My other two companions are older Jesuits, Bill Haas and Bob Bertelli from the university. Both are in their late 60s, but experienced golfers: short, straight and shrewd. They rarely beat themselves. If they're over the hill, I want to be over the same hill when I'm their age.

A beautiful hole

Golf is a great game for companionship. Unlike other games, where the goal is to beat the opposition, golf is played primarily against the course, not against the other golfers. We throw in a dollar bet on team play, high ball/low ball, but that's just a dash of paprika in the chili.

Because golf is played against the

course, big Rod can have fun playing with me and my 15 handicap and with the old guys who use a cart. As I said, golf is like life: men and women, big and small, young and old, veterans and beginnings can all play together.

Hole 3, par 4, 425 yards, dog leg to the right, with a pond at the dog's knee to prevent most golfers from trying to cut the hole short. "Gorilla" Smolinski goes right over the top of the pond. The rest of us have to play around it. He gets his par, the rest of us are happy enough with routine fives.

What a beautiful hole, Lord. Where this side of the Rockies does God's beauty shine forth in nature better than on a well-laid-out golf course, with the soft rustle of the wind in the trees, the sun glinting on the pond, the sharp green of the fairways contrasting against the gray-green of the rough. Even the menace of out of bounds on the left is softened by a row of bushes flecked with flowers.

Peanuts on golf

How easily our hearts lift up to You, when we gaze on the beauty of Your earthly face. Jules Hardouin-Mansart, who laid out the formal gardens at Versailles for Louis XIV, was a rank amateur compared to Robert Trent Jones and the best golf course architects. At Versailles the bushes are like so many Prussian soldiers on parade, but the highest art is to hide art and a good golf course combines the natural and the artificial so that the course is a new Garden of Eden. But all architects are only humble gardeners, but You, O Lord, are the real Architect, of this world and all its wondrous beauty!

Hole 4, par 4, 370 yards, with a raised green surrounded by three sand traps. Bill popped up his tee shot, so I ride out to my ball in the cart with Bob. I say something about the course mirror-

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ing the beauty of God. He retorts, "Yeah, but remember that *Peanuts* cartoon [*Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 6, 1991; no. 5, p. 8]. Just as Snoopy is about to shoot, Charlie Brown quotes Walter Hagen, 'As we go through Life, we should take time to stop and smell the roses.' Snoopy, however, has a very different concern: the roses are all out of bounds. That's true in life, that's true in golf. Forget the roses. Keep your eye on the ball. This game is all concentration."

I try to make the good scholastic distinction: My roses and Hagen's have nothing in common. To cap my point, I swing a bit harder, get my right hand in too soon, and watch in dismay as my ball hooks left, out of bounds.

Hole 5, par 3, 156 yards with a pond right in front of the green. I tee off last, after Bob. He pulls out an old "confidence" ball that he has been trying to lose all month. I kid him about it.

"Bob, did you hear about the bishop who was facing a long carry over the water and had only two golf balls in his bag, a scruffy old Kroflight and a new Titleist."

"No, I haven't."

"He prayed for guidance, and God spoke in his heart, 'Play the Titleist.' As he was about to shoot, God spoke again 'Don't forget your practice swing.' He took his swing. Again the Lord's voice: 'Play the Kroflight.'"

Eagles and buzzards

We all break up laughing. Bob plays his old ball — a low line drive right in the middle of the pond. It takes one long skid off the water, hops twice on the grass, and rolls onto the green 10 feet from the hole. We all break up again.

Bob only grunts, "Now I'll never get rid of that darn ball."

I hit a flat shot which plunks into the middle of the pond. Bob grunts

again, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord."

I come back, "Easy for you to joke, but until the last two holes I had a good score going." But he's right. The Christian has to learn to take the eagles and the buzzards, the joys and sorrows of life and golf from the hand of a loving Lord who teaches us through their alternation not a Stoic endurance but the mystery of His love that chastises us and teaches us.

One for God

Hole 6, par 4, 440 yards. We turn a bend and reach the tee. Trouble ahead. We've caught up to a very slow four-some. This is all I need, after blowing a good round. My friends say that I play golf to see how fast I can get back home. My fretting is obvious to my companions.

"Donnelly," Bob cracks, "you deserve the title of 'World's most impatient man'."

Bill Haas corrects him, "No, he should be called the gray-haired Jim Carvill — after that guy in the Guinness book of records who shot 78 while playing 18 holes in 27 minutes. Except Donnelly would shoot 78 for nine."

Rod Smolinski is more philosophical.

"Did you hear the story about the Franciscan, the Dominican, and the Jesuit who were playing behind a four-some who took an eternity on each hole. After the round they were bitching over their beer in the clubhouse, when the bartender said, 'But didn't you know that those four guys are blind.' The Franciscan was struck with remorse and began a collection to send the four blind golfers to the Special Olympics. The Dominican exclaimed, 'What a marvelous *exemplum*. I can see three ways to enfold its spiritual richness in my next sermon.' He

grabbed a paper bar napkin and started writing notes furiously. The Jesuit started going around the clubhouse for signatures to petition for a new club rule: 'Play by blind golfers must be restricted until after sunset.'"

Score one for Smolinski. Also score one for God. I have to control my impatience. Others have their rights too, and I can use the longer break between shots to smell the roses and tell God how wonderful it all is.

Hole 7, par 3, 140 yards. A good seven iron will carry the traps around the green, but both Bill and I fall short into the same trap. I shoot first and get my ball onto the green — but barely. This will be another bogey. As Bill addresses his ball in the sand, he grounds his club. That's a no-no in the rules of golf.

Indirect approach?

Now in golf there are no referees. Golf is a gentleman's game, and golfers are expected to call penalties on themselves. Three holes ago Bill did the same thing and said nothing. I've seen him do it a thousand times over the years. I'm angry that my own round has collapsed, enough to tempt me to insist that he take a penalty. That would even our little match, Smolinski and Haas versus Bertelli and me.

I bite my lip. Why cause a flare up? Maybe the indirect approach while waiting on the next tee? I can ask Haas's partner Smolinski about the rule in the abstract. Haas will get the message. No, Lord, that's not Your message or Your Good News. It's my petty pique coming out. Haas is not going to change. What difference does it make? None of us plays the strict rules of golf; we all improve a bad lie in the fairway, on the excuse that the rich folks in the country clubs always get a good lie on their manicured fairways. Why should they have all the fun?

But that's only an excuse and we know it. There are times, Lord, when we have to stand up for principle, whatever the cost. But venting our frustrations by blowing a whistle overgrounding a club is not one of those times. We have to live with people and love people, warts and all.

Hole 8, par 4, 333 yards. The tee shot should be to the right to set up an easy shot to the green. I pull left. Why? Because I am still fretting about Haas. Smart golf is 90 percent concentration. I have to stop theologizing on the golf course. Golf and God don't go together.

But that too is a half truth — not even a half truth. How many times have I played a round without a religious thought crossing my mind and still lacked concentration in the few crucial minutes when I'm lining up to shoot? God is not my problem — I just need a wee bit more discipline. Again I card a bogey.

Hole 9, par 4, 420 yards uphill

toward the clubhouse. The last hole in every round is uphill, even when the clubhouse is downhill. Usually I'm tired. If I'm shooting well, there is pressure to bring in a good score. If I'm playing poorly, there's discouragement. But not for me, not today. Certainly no pressure, not with my score. It is neither a descent into the ninth ring of Dante's inferno nor mounting through the ninth sphere toward the beatific vision. Just another round.

Every round special

But I've gotten away from my desk, walked in the sunshine, enjoyed God's greenery and goodness, had some jokes with my friends, and learned a bit about myself. That's plenty. The spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola centers on finding God in all things. Gerard Manley Hopkins found Him in pied beauty. Every round of golf is a special kind of experience of pied beauty: exhilaration

and exasperation, hope and disappointment, rivalry and camaraderie, but always, like life, the realization that "In Your will is our peace."

Usually after a round the losers stand the winners to a beer, but not today. The foursome ahead of us slowed us down. Smolinski and Bertelli have appointments and will have to shower. We three Jesuits pile our clubs into the back of the station wagon, shout goodbye to Smolinski, and head back to the university — but not before reserving a tee time for next Monday. *Deo gratias!* *

* Everybody in this story is fictitious except the author.

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