

BEHIND THE BOOK - PASSION FOR GOLF: IN PURSUIT OF THE INNERMOST GAME

This is golf month, as mentioned. For me, the great game has been mainly a middle-age passion. As a boy I played Little League baseball, touch (and, if it snowed, sometimes tackle) football on Essex Street, low-level ice hockey on club teams at Exeter, B.U., and Brown, and in the men's league, outdoors, during the one winter we lived on Martha's Vineyard. I ran cross-country, shot hoops, rowed varsity crew for two years at B.U. and a year and three-quarters at Brown, and was nuts about Uechi Ryu karate for a while in my forties.

Various health issues made hockey, rowing, karate, running, and tackle football on snowy pavement less than wise, and so, fifteen years ago, I funneled all that athletic passion into the game of golf.

As a teenager I had played a few times with my dad and his brothers, grown men who were kind enough to take a kid along on their nine-hole weekend relaxation. I'll never forget that generosity, and I've never laughed as much on a golf course, but I didn't know a draw from a fade in those days, and certainly couldn't hit either one when I needed to.

But just after the time Alexandra was born - 1997 - I started going to a couple of local nine-hole courses - Edge Hill and Worthington - and began to try to learn the game. Worthington is high up in the eastern slopes of the Berkshires and, with my set of cheap clubs, I'd be out there alone on April afternoons when there was still snow in the shady places. Once the season got underway, I joined the men's league, read instructional books, played in rain, hail, heat and chill, practiced every chance I got and learned by playing with better golfers. By 2000, still a fairly high-handicapper, I felt I knew the game well enough to write about it. I picked a name from the masthead of *Travel and Leisure Golf* and wrote the editor a two-page letter, telling her that I was headed to Rome on vacation and suggesting I might put together an article about eating and golfing there. She wrote back saying something like, "I get a hundred letters like this a month, but your idea is so unusual that we're going to give you the assignment."

During a month-long vacation in Rome, I played six great courses in and around that city, sampled some restaurants with Amanda, and was paid \$5,000 for the privilege. Talk about being hooked! Although the editor liked it, *T&L Golf* never ran the article, but I did do some other, smaller pieces for them, and then for *Links*, *Golf Digest*, and *Golf Magazine*. I was a golf writer, more or less, and completely addicted to the game. I broke 40 for the first time on a nine-hole course, then broke 80 for eighteen. Not high-level golf, but not bad for a late starter.

A couple of years went by and I had a surprise call from an editor at *Golf World*. "Hi, my name is Tim Murphy and you don't know me," he said. "I'm a friend of Suzanne Strempek Shea and she recommended you as a writer who also golfs. We're running a fiction issue and I'm wondering if you'd like to submit a short story. We pay two dollars a word, maximum 7,500 words."

I wrote a story for them that year, and the following year, too (that second story is now available as an eBook single entitled "Last Call"), and that began a great friendship with Tim and with

some of the other fine people at that late, great magazine - Bill Fields, Bob Carney, Ron Sirak, John Barton, Peter Finch, and others. This led to a series of assignments in exchange for which most golfers would give away a new Audi. I wrote about golf in Russia, golf in Italy again, was sent to play spectacular new courses like Cabot Links in Nova Scotia, and Sand Hills in Nebraska, and then the world-famous Oakmont Country Club outside Pittsburgh.

After several years and a string of essays and feature pieces, Tim asked me where I'd most like to go next and I said, "Cuba," and to his - and the magazine's - everlasting credit, they said, "Okay. No problem." The story of that amazing trip is too long to post here, but it is one of my most cherished memories.

A year or so later, when the editors knew the magazine was not long for this world, they sent me, as a kind of swan song, to Ireland, to play The European Club, and as long as I live I will remember that magnificent layout on the Irish Sea, having the course to myself for two consecutive days and getting paid to do it.

In 2000, my friend Craig Nova, who does not play golf, introduced me to Nick Lyons. At that time Nick ran a small publishing house, The Lyons Press, that put out a lot of sports and fishing books. Nick gave me a contract to write a short book on my love of golf and he let me put in all the philosophy I wanted.

He was one of the very best editors I've ever had and the result was *Passion for Golf: In Pursuit of the Innermost Game* (still available in eBook and print from PFP). The cover photo, taken by my wife Amanda, shows me up at Worthington in February, standing on the snow-covered fifth tee, trying to hit a snowball. It's the perfect cover, I think, for fanatical New England golfers who suffer so much in the cold months.

Golf has become a family passion. When the girls were three or so, I started taking them to Scotti's, the local driving range. I let them have fun there, no lessons, a minimum of swing advice - just fun. A bit later on, Amanda and I started taking them out late on Saturday evenings, mostly at the beautiful Crumpin Fox Club. We'd make sure not to hold up other players, and we'd let our athletic daughters chip and putt with us at first, and then play from the hundred-yard marker, then the hundred-fifty, and then, eventually, from the forward tees.

Now, Alexandra is on the Exeter Academy varsity team, Juliana just broke 50 at Hickory Ridge, on her fourteenth birthday, and they are very quickly approaching the place where they will be beating old Dad on a regular basis. Amanda plays, too - the most even-tempered golfer I've ever known - and on spring vacations, with the local courses still buried in white, we like to drive down to South Carolina and play as a family.

I have friends who mock the game, and I can understand that. From the outside it looks pretty foolish. But once you get to be fairly competent, you discover that you can hit a ball two football fields and have it land more or less where you aimed. There is a strange thrill in that. As my golf buddy Bill McGee likes to say after a nice shot, "Non-golfers will never understand."

Golf gets me outdoors, sometimes for a hilly eight-mile walk. It challenges me physically, mentally, and emotionally, and offers some spiritual lessons, as well (how to face adversity; how to deal with public humiliation, success, failure, and the success and failure and humiliation of your friends; how to tame the restless mind in good times and bad; how to strive for perfection while knowing you'll never come close). I've met some of my very best friends through golf, played all over the northern hemisphere, and even made some money (from writing about it, not winning tournaments.) I think my love for it shines through clearly in *Passion for Golf*, and also in *The Italian Summer* and *The Ten Commandments of Golf Etiquette* illustrated by my good friend, the artist John Recco.

That's this month's tale. Thank you for your interest.