



In Defense of the Flub

Forget the high-tech precision gear. Miscues and anguish are what's great about golf

By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT

BY VIRTUE OF my job (professional golf writer!) I am privileged to play some of the best golf courses in the world. Just in the past few years—please don't hate me—I have played Pine Valley, Pebble Beach, St. Andrews, Shinnecock, Bandon Dunes, Baltusrol, Mid Ocean and other gems so numerous that you don't want to hear about it. Nevertheless, I play most of my golf at a friendly, unprepossessing 27-hole course with no range called Blue Hill, operated by the township where I live. And frankly, I look forward to my rounds at Blue Hill almost as much as at the famous courses. The atmosphere at the latter is almost always a bit starchy. I have to be on my best behavior, and usually so does everybody else.

At my home course, on the other hand, the rich emotional life of golf is on

full display. There's joy, of course—occasional bursts of elation ringing through the pines. But more often there's anguish, and it's the unmediated groans and full-throated cursing that tells me I'm among real golfers, pursuing the game we love at full tilt. For many hard-core golfers, counterintuitive as it might sound, this is music to the ears.

In this weekly column I hope to celebrate the glories and tribulations of the game we play, from the grace of the world's greatest players to the simple splendor of kids playing 'til dusk on a muni at the edge of town. Golf is about athleticism and competition, but it is also about social life, and business, family,

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culture, travel, history—and real estate and retirement. I intend to delve into the daily struggles we undergo, including the quest of everyday players to enjoy the game in spite of the cruelty of the golf gods and the occasional snobbery and overzealous commercialism of the golf establishment. Golf should be more accessible, more fun and less daunting.



Anguish should not be confused with anger, a dysfunctional emotion when it comes to golf. Anger is unwarranted in a game that people choose to play voluntarily. Anguish, by contrast, is the heart and soul of golf. It's the disappointment that results from doing something sloppily that you have done much better innumerable times before. Women golfers have a different, often more mature way of dealing with their anguish (fodder for a future column), but well-adjusted golfers of both genders eventually accept anguish as an integral part of the game.

A few months ago, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology hosted a conference on golf and technology. Many of the best minds in the game were present: Rick Martino, head of instruction for the Professional Golfers' Association; Laird Small, director of the Pebble Beach Golf Academy; and noted instructors such as Chuck Cook, Jimmy Ballard and Michael Hebron. The primary focus was on how the latest optical and biometric sensing technologies might be used to help golfers perform more efficiently. One company showed off an electronic grip that registers the club's position at every point during a swing. Another displayed a scale that tracks a player's exact center of balance from takeaway to follow-through. A physical therapist reported on a study in which six weeks of flexibility training with volunteers produced an average 3% increase in torso rotation on the backswing.

Clearly, these guys are working hard to help us everyday players improve, but you couldn't listen to the presentations and the responses from the floor without picking up on the participants' underlying frustration. Why weren't more golfers availing themselves of all this wonderful knowledge? The unstated, accusatory subtitle of the conference might as well have been: Don't golfers want to get better?

Of course we do. If there is one universal among golfers, it's that we want to improve. But I'm afraid these esteemed professionals underestimate how content most of us are simply to get just a teeny bit better. Few of us aspire to some specific

@#%!!

Yes, the pros misfire, too. Below, some famous flubs.

COURSE	MOMENT OF ANGUISH	COMMENT
1988 Masters at Augusta National	Seve Ballesteros, in contention in the final round, four-putts on the 16 th green.	Mr. Ballesteros says, famously: "I miss, I miss, I miss, I make."
1989 Masters	On the first hole of a sudden-death playoff with Nick Faldo, Scott Hoch misses a 2½-foot putt for the win.	Mr. Hoch redeems himself three weeks later in Las Vegas by one-putting four of the five holes in a playoff, to win.
1991 Ryder Cup at the Ocean Course, Kiawah Island, S.C.	Bernard Langer, on the 18 th hole of his match with Hale Irwin, misses a six-foot putt that would have sealed the victory.	As captain of the Europeans in 2005, Mr. Langer led his team to its most-lopsided victory in Ryder Cup history.
1996 Masters	Greg Norman, who begins the day with a six-stroke lead, shoots 78 to lose to Nick Faldo by five strokes.	The most humiliating collapse in any major golf tournament.
1999 British Open at Carnoustie, Scotland	Jean Van de Velde blows a three-shot lead by unwisely deciding not to lay up on final hole. His ball later wound up in the creek.	In this case, there was double anguish: once from making a poor decision, and once from making a poor swing.
2006 Bay Hill Invitational, Bay Hill Club and Lodge, Orlando, Fla.	Leading by three strokes, journeyman Greg Owen three-putts from three feet on the 17 th hole, then bogeys 18.	After missing the first putt on 17, he rushed the second—and lost the tournament.



Bernhard Langer



Greg Norman



Greg Owen



Jean Van de Velde

or absolute skill level in golf. We just want to feel that things are on the uptick.

Some golfers, of course, derive great satisfaction from working hard on their games. And the MIT crowd has a lot to offer them. One positive note to come out of the conference was that the average USGA handicap, after decades of stagnation, has actually started to come down, to 15.0 (for men) from 16.2 a decade earlier.

But most of us are just as happy with more portable improvements, sometimes obtainable at the pro shop. Those gleaming new drivers, when properly fitted to a player's swing, really can get you an extra five or 10 yards with fewer mis-hits. This month's tip from a golf magazine, even if it directly contradicts the same magazine's tip on the same topic last month, might contain just the swing thought you need to cure a nagging problem.

One of the most revealing anecdotes at the conference came from Chuck

Cook. Two years ago at his club, 40 members committed to practice and take lessons at least twice a week, with a special emphasis on short-game skills and playing strategies. Whenever they failed to show up, Mr. Cook and his staff did everything but send out goon squads. The results were sensational: Handicaps dropped an average of 47%. But for most of the participants, enough was enough. When the program was offered again the next year, only 11 of the 40 re-upped.

The point, I suppose, is that golfers are smart enough to realize the futility of trying to perfect their game. You only have to watch Tiger Woods—the best golfer in the world—stalk off the green in fury after missing a makeable putt, to feel renewed respect for whatever your own modest hopes for improvement are. Wherever you are along the skill spectrum, getting to the next, slightly better level is a monumental challenge. And it doesn't nec-

essarily entail hooking your body up to a gyro-biometric torso-twisting machine.

The key to contentment in golf is dialing in just the right amount of anguish. Set your sights too high and you're doomed to frustration (which I define as anguishing over the same failed expectations time after time). Set them too low, and what's the point? You might as well just putter around the golf course in a cart admiring the holes without playing them. Whether or not we want to admit it, miscues are our points of deepest emotional engagement with golf. Without them, the joy we feel when we do manage to pull off great shots wouldn't be nearly as intense.

On the short, oceanside par-three seventh hole at Pebble Beach, I played with a guy who seemed to hit the perfect tee shot. A gust of wind caught it, however, and the ball ricocheted off the rocks past the hole. After our round, the fellow who cleaned our clubs asked how we enjoyed the course and the gorgeous seventh in particular. "It was incredible," my playing companion said. "I hit the ball flush, but bang—off the rocks and into the drink." You should have seen his face: It was beaming, because this guy was a true golfer. He had anguished after he hit the shot, but I have to believe he enioved the hole in memory much more than if he had parked his tee shot neatly on the green and puttred for a routine par.

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