

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

GOLF

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NEW EDITION

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

GOLF



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First published 1987

This edition published 2013

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Publisher: Thomas Drewry

Publishing Director: Brooke McDonald

Series Editor: David Allsop

Design and Illustration by Jim Shannon

With kind acknowledgments to Peter Gammond,
author of earlier editions of *The Bluffer's Guide to Golf*

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A CIP Catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

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ISBN: 978-1-909365-32-2 (print)

978-1-909365-33-9 (ePub)

978-1-909365-34-6 (Kindle)

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Golfers can be quite difficult, withdrawn and hard to talk to, especially in the build-up, during and after an important game – in other words, all the time.

THE NEVER-ENDING PAGEANT

You may think you understand what PG Wodehouse described as ‘that never-ending pageant, which men call Golf,’ well enough to hold your own when conversation around the dinner table settles on the game’s inexhaustible fascination. Don’t get over-confident – nobody fully understands golf.

Mark Twain is credited with describing it as ‘a good walk spoiled’, but he might have missed the point. It’s not just about spending long hours tramping around an elaborate obstacle course competing to hit a small ball into a series of small holes.

Golf is the bluffer’s game *par excellence* at all levels of ability and experience. At its simplest, it is about pretending to be a better golfer than you are. At its most advanced and calculating, it is about bluffing your way to victory, or at least a less ignominious defeat, in any number of ways that come under the broad umbrella of psychological warfare. Your greatest strength is the extent to which you are successful in reading and playing your opponent (not the ball).

By your words, actions, body language, deployment

of the rule book and even your choice of outfit, you can bluff your adversary into using the wrong club, conceding a putt or accepting a penalty. You can inspire in him* thoughts of self-fulfilling defeatism or lift him up to an exalted plane of fatal over-confidence. You may even be able to bluff yourself into playing a better shot. All of these invaluable tricks of the trade will be explained in the pages that follow, along with the basic technical and background information about golf and its culture required for the armchair golfer to pass muster in polite society.



Becoming proficient at golf requires
an investment of more time and money
than most of us can justify.

Will golf make you a better person? Nothing could be less certain. It may well have the opposite effect, rendering you disappointed, bitter and considerably poorer than you might otherwise have been when you count the cost of

* Gender matters. Golf is a game of few words, or should be. It is in this spirit of economy, and not out of any gender bias, that we have employed the shorter and simpler forms 'he', 'him' and 'man' in preference to the longer 'he and/or she', 'him and/or her' and 'man and/or woman'. As any bluffer will tell you, egalitarianism is alive and well on the golf course. Though not necessarily in the clubhouse...

membership subscriptions, green fees, Kevlar-reinforced rescue clubs, self-propelling electric trolleys, miracle-fibre breathable waterproofs, lost bets, hefty supplements for air travel, divorces and missed opportunities to earn an honest living. Golfers can be quite difficult, withdrawn and hard to talk to, especially in the build-up, during and after an important game – in other words, all the time.

They say golf reveals character like no other sport; ‘they’ being people who are good at golf and inclined to win. Those who are less good at the game find this so-called truth less convincing, or at least less comfortable. Golf doesn’t reveal character so much as the injustice of life, the world, everything really.

But there is an undeniable correspondence between a player’s behaviour during the course of a golf match and his real self. Are you a bag half-full sort of golfer, or bag half-empty? If the jury had played golf with OJ Simpson (see ‘Passing Muster at the Club’, page 72), would it have seen the real person and would its verdict have therefore been different? Does the sight of your ball in an awkward position that could easily be improved by a discreet nudge of the toecap make you wonder if anyone is watching and think: ‘why not?’

In the end, it matters little if golf does or does not reveal character accurately. It is widely believed to do so, and it follows that the better you are perceived to be at golf, the more favourably people will look on you.

Unfortunately, becoming proficient at golf requires an investment of more time and money than most of us can

justify, as well as an early start in life, as enjoyed by Tiger Woods, Rory McIlroy and other child prodigies whose mothers fed them baby food with a cut-down spoon or wedge. (As you are about to find out, these are both names for lofted clubs deemed to be among the easiest to use). If you are reading this book, as opposed to having it read to you as a child, it is almost certainly too late to take up the game with any hope of satisfaction.

So, like the rest of us, you will have to bluff. And here you enter perilous territory, which is where this short guide can offer invaluable help. It sets out to conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in discussions about golf, and to equip you with a vocabulary and evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and methods that might even allow you to be accepted as a golfer of rare ability and experience. But it will do more. It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight – without anyone discovering that, until you read it, you probably didn't know the difference between a Scargill and a Brazilian.

1744 AND ALL THAT

Golf's origins are shrouded in the mists and mishits of time and need not detain the bluffer long. It is polite to affect a respectful awareness of the history of the game, but too close a preoccupation may mark you out as a nerd.

Nonetheless, you should have a certain basic familiarity with its origins. Golf began in Scotland, and remains a Scottish verb – ‘to golf’. It is an essentially Scottish game which should be played in a stiff breeze over nice firm turf – on the cusp between pasture and tundra – at a pace sufficient to keep the blood flowing but without excessive wind chill. One of the game's great drawbacks is the amount of space required per player – many thousands of square feet – compared with bridge (3 sq ft) or squash (just under 700 sq ft). You might mention the latter if only to provide an opportunity to quote the modern American satirist PJ O'Rourke who, in pointing out that golf is a superior game to squash, observed that: ‘You can smoke or drink on a golf course without interrupting the game, and you can take a leak – something you can't do on a squash

court and shouldn't do in a swimming pool.'

Golf thus requires a sparsely populated region and preferably one with a harsh climate. Scotland – or at least its coastline, the only part of the country with the right type of grass – is ideal. Not many people fancy golf or any other outdoor activity on a typical Scottish summer's day, to say nothing of spring, and this keeps the courses nice and empty, allowing the game to flow.

Irish golfing conditions are similar – not quite so cold, but wetter – and the game took an early hold there too, on the coast once again, the interior being waterlogged. On the testing Lancashire coast, or Fylde, it is often said that if you can't see the Pennines it's raining; and if you can, you should have your eye on the ball. This is another golfing heartland.

Over time, golf mania led to the demand for courses in drier and warmer locations such as Berkshire, the south of Spain and the south of France, where renegades from Wellington's Scottish brigades not unreasonably put down roots on their way home from the Battle of Salamanca in 1812. Who can blame them?

Whether it was golf, marriage, diplomacy, or some other confrontation that the dashing nineteenth-century Prussian soldier and philosopher Carl von Clausewitz described as 'war by other means', the game has its origins in the perennial conflict between England, Scotland, France and other fringe participants in what is now known as the Six Nations Championship (it's a rugby contest apparently).

1421 At the Battle of Baugé, during the drinks interval, the French entertain (or thrash) their Scottish allies (or

mercenaries) at 'chole,' a hockey-like contest played with sticks and balls. The Scots take chole back to Scotland and rename it 'hole.' A new sport is born. One day it will be renamed GOLF, a multi-purpose acronym if you prefer Gentlemen Only, Ladies Forbidden; Game of Limitless Frustration; Great Opportunity to Lose Friends, etc. The actual etymological provenance of the name is uncertain.

1457 Golf is banned by King James II because it is too much fun to be allowed in Scotland. Also, it distracts the soldiery from archery. This misguided ban (could there be a better preparation for the longbowman than flinging a 3-iron into the Scottish wind?) was repeated in the early 1470s and again in 1491, so it was obviously disregarded.

1561 Marie Stuart, a keen golfer, crosses the Channel to become Mary, Queen of Scots, bringing with her several young male escorts or 'cadets', who compete to lift up her skirts and carry her clubs during the game, dispensing gallantries such as 'nice ankle turn, ma'am', 'ne'er up, ne'er in' and 'perchance milady may receive a stroke at this hole'. Soon, all fashionable golfers want their own cadet.

1567 Mary is in trouble for playing golf too soon after the murder of her most recent husband. This is hardly fair. Several hours had elapsed.

1590 Sir Walter Raleigh drops his coat in casual water (a temporary hazard on the course) and invents smoking. Golf becomes even more fun, and Elizabeth I probably became the first golf widow.

1593 John Henrie and Pat Rogie are imprisoned for 'playing of the gowff on the links of Leith every Sabbath the time of the sermones.' Who were they? (Keen golfers, probably. This is a relatively oft-cited early golf trivia fact. PG Wodehouse dedicated his golf book, *Golf Without Tears: Stories of Golfers and Lovers*, to them). Sunday



18 holes is enough for a good start
to go disastrously wrong and for a
hopeless duffer to fluke a par.

gowffers seek to avoid detection by carrying the club upside down between shots and pretending it's a walking stick. Hence the term: 'Sabbath sticks'.

1603 After a game at Musselburgh, James VI travels south to become James I and doubtless draws up plans for the first Anglo-Scottish Golfing Union. Golf would soon be played on Blackheath in south-east London, and one day as far as Sandwich.

1618 James VI/I grants his subjects the right to play golf on Sundays.

1620 100 puritans, unwilling to remain in a country so licentious and debauched as to permit Sunday golf, set sail for America. Golf spreads like wildfire over there, but not for another eight-or-so generations.

1744 The Gentleman Golfers of Edinburgh organise the first championship and write the first set of *Rules of Golf*. The 13 commandments include ‘your tee must be upon the ground’ – a rule worth bearing in mind to this day.

1754 The Society of St Andrews Golfers is founded and decides to call its home town the ‘Home of Golf’. 80 years later it renames itself the Royal and Ancient Golf Club (R&A) and takes over the government of golf everywhere except the USA, where different rules apply. This schism may explain why the Ryder Cup (*see* page 95) is such an argumentative event.

1764 St Andrews converts its golf course from 22 holes to 18. David Hume, Adam Smith and other enlightened Scottish thinkers understand that a game of golf can only go for so long: 18 holes is enough for a good start to go disastrously wrong and for a hopeless duffer to fluke a par, and is as much golf as a man wants to play between an optimistic kippers-and-oatmeal breakfast and drowning his sorrows in whisky at lunchtime. 18 holes therefore became the allotted span, and courses have been designed this way ever since. Sometimes they go out and back, at other times back and out, or even round and round. No one cares, as long as they end at the clubhouse.

1800s Golf spreads to all corners of the British Empire. The conquest of Malaya led to the invention of the gutta-percha (gutty) ball which replaced the elegant but expensive and ineffectual ‘featherie’, which was a leather pouch stuffed with goose or chicken feathers. You will do your bluffing

credentials no harm by knowing that gutta-percha is the latex produced from a tree commonly found in Malaysia. For many years all gutty balls were handmade.

In the early days, the golf ball was smooth. Later, golfers noticed that as balls became old and battle-scarred, they flew faster and farther. (In 1905 William Taylor added a pock-marked or dimple pattern to the ball at the manufacturing stage.)

Tee technology proceeded apace. Until the late nineteenth century, golfers filled their pockets with sand and, when permitted to tee the ball, placed it on top of a carefully constructed mound. This took ages, and besides, golfers felt that the quarries (or bunkers) they excavated for teeing sand were large enough and further digging would only make the game more difficult, which ran contrary to the constructive spirit of the tee. Another solution was urgently required.

1889 First portable golf tee is patented by Scottish golfers William Bloxsom and Arthur Douglas. The not very snappily named Bloxsom Douglas would soon face stiff competition from the Perfectum (rubber tee with a metal spike) and the ultimately victorious Victor (not very different from the Perfectum, but with a cup-shaped top). Bluffers who attempt to impress playing companions, friends and family by reviving the Perfectum v Victor debate may not always find a receptive audience.

1891 The R&A achieves the long-overdue standardisation of the golf hole on the green. It would be the size of the

first ever 'hole cutter' developed by the greenkeepers of Musselburgh, a municipal links course near Edinburgh, in 1829. Legend tells us that this revolutionary invention was fashioned from a section of drainage pipe left lying around the green. The diameter was 4.25 inches, which just happens to be the diameter of the golf hole used around the world today. One way or another, the final agreed size was almost certainly arrived at arbitrarily.

1914-1945 Two world wars had little impact on Europe's best golf courses.

1961 Carter Bros Rug Co of Chattanooga, Tennessee, invents the Cocktail Golf rug 'for golfing executives who practise putting in the office.' This brightens up office life to no end and solves absenteeism at a stroke. 'The miniature three-hole golf course is a textured rug made of nylon with a putting course laid out in different colors and pile depths. The holes are three soft rubber practice cups. There's a built-up rough around the edge, a smooth, flat fairway, depressed sand traps and even a water hazard in the center.' The Cocktail Golf rug is a precious bluffing collectable, more highly prized than even the cocktail flagstick.

1962 With the continuing technological advancement of the golf buggy, golf's evolution was almost complete. The Ramble-Seat model ('for shopping, golf – and fun!'), for instance, was made for the average-sized American golfer, but needed an extra power pack and trailer before his golf bag, soda fountain and hot dogs could be accommodated.

Bluffers must deplore the golf buggy, and you should complain about being forced to use them on courses (mostly foreign) with steep hills between holes.

1971 Research and development begins on the golf ball that won't slice; it uses an asymmetric dimple pattern to ensure a self-correcting flight path. Marketed as the Polara a few years later, it was soon banned (like most things that make golf easier).

1980s-on Anything that makes golf easier is similarly banned. In perpetuity.