

With all the insanity swirling about these days, I think it behooves all of us to do what I did yesterday



Forget about it all for a couple of hours and go play golf.

I don't know what it is about the game of golf that hooked me. Generally speaking, I don't have the time to go spend 3-4 hours and more money than I used to spend on bar tabs in acts of ritual frustration. Nor do I really have the money to blow on such activity. Yet in recent times I find myself not only playing more, but craving the time to play.

To be sure, there are obvious benefits. You're outdoors, in a pretty setting. Birds are singing. New grass carpets your surroundings in a beautiful, brilliant emerald backdrop. Even the sand traps look like white beach against a distant shore. Most important, you and your buddies have a cooler full of beverages ready to be enjoyed or used as therapy throughout the day. You are now in a place where you can scratch, swear, tell dirty jokes, pass gas with impunity. Life, as you currently know it, is darn near as good as it gets.

If you are me, you carefully line up your drive, take a practice swing or two, tell yourself to watch the ball and make "good contact" with a nice, well-practiced swing.

You see, the absolute bare basics of the game are this: Head down, knees bent, arms straight, keep your eyes on the ball, and you'll probably score better than average.

This is pretty good advice for many activities, from water skiing to sex.

Too often, though, your first attempt at tee shot results in a something akin to a spasm than a golf swing. In my case, I have swung for the fences and looked up, expecting to see my drive taking off with the speed and accuracy of an Exocet missile. Instead, my swing has become more of a sudden onset of St. Vitus' Dance. If I've made any contact at all with the ball, it is now dribbling sickeningly to the left, where it might limp slowly to rest just behind the ladies' tee box.

This gives rise to the next peculiarity of golf: Annoying clichés.

Everybody's got one for every situation, and we all constantly use them like religious liturgy.

"Every time you look up all you see is a bad shot," someone is likely to say.

"Let the club head do the work," another might offer helpfully.

"SB↑*YEUSI!!!!" I might say drolly, comparing my effort to my Lord and Savior riding a motorcycle.

The movie *Caddyshack* revolutionized golf in the early 1980s by providing golfers with something to say to each other besides hundred-year-old clichés. I doubt there is a golfer in America under the age of 55 who can get through a round of golf without quoting, not just a line or two, but entire paragraphs, scenes, pages, of the script.

After twenty something years and thousands of dollars and hours spent playing the game, I have improved slightly. Gone, for the most part, are the days of my blistering Jack Russell bean ball drives, chips that cut smiles across every ball in my bag, endless melody of splashes at every body of water on the course.

In fact, there was a time that I could find water more easily and accurately than a well digger, geologist, or divining rod expert.

I'll never forget playing an Atlanta city park course about 15 years ago. It was summer and the state of Georgia was in severe drought. Even drainage culverts were bone-dry.

I got all of my drive on a long par three -- flew the green, in fact. I

found my ball lying 25 feet behind the green in a dusty concrete drainage culvert, right in the middle of a tiny puddle obviously recently created by a mid-sized neighborhood dog. This was, in fact, the only semblance of water on the entire course, possibly even the only damp spot in all of Georgia -- and I found it with a Max-Fli 3 and 7-iron.

My game has improved. I've been hitting the ball well enough to keep it in safe territory most of the time, a feat that has probably knocked 15 strokes per side off my game, making me one of millions of average golfers and almost completely erasing my Tourets-like propensity for taking the Lord's name in vain every time I attempt to hit a golf ball. True, my swing is often compared to a field hand killing a snake with a cane pole. But at least my shots are getting higher in the air than a Jack Russell terrier's head, and more often than not, they're moving in the general direction I intended them to move.

All this still begs the question: Why would one spend so much money and time on such ritual self-abuse?

Simple: Because of those moments when everything clicks...

Your drive finally does, in fact, take off like an Exocet missile, flying 280 yards down the fairway in a perfect, straight line, to land within a pitching iron of the green. Your chip to the green is perfect; the ball drops, as gently as a little girl's kiss, on the edge of the green with just enough speed and power to roll it within 6 feet of the cup. Your putt, a careful and deliberately calculated thing of beauty, drops easily into the hole. Maybe not on the same hole, but at some point during the entire 18. And if it all comes together like that, even once, well....wow!

Then, if you're me, you smile as though you really meant to do that, carefully line up your next tee shot, take a deep breath, and blast it 4000 miles into dense, snake-infested wilderness.

And yes, this is definitely a good time.