Golfing-Unto-Death

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The game of golf is an interesting competition between players in which every swing of the club is the player’s advancement toward losing the game. Unlike other sports, golf scores go in the opposite direction, meaning that the lower the score a player has at the end, the higher his or her ranking is in the results; the player with the least points wins. The reason for this is that each point corresponds to a swing of the club which is called a “stroke.” There are 18 holes on a full golf course, and each hole comes with a “par” or expected amount of strokes. When a player gets the ball in the hole in less than the designated par for that hole, his or her points (strokes) are regarded as minus points. So, a player can actually end the game in the negative, which is paradoxically positive toward his or her standing. It is typical in professional competitions for the winner to be in the negative points, which is to say “below par” or what is allotted as expected.

Drawing from Heidegger’s (2008) Being and Time, the game of golf is analogous to our Being-unti-death. Each day that we awake is another swing at the ball of life. How well we hit the ball determines the position from which subsequent shots can be made, or our “lie.” A poorly made shot tends to send the ball flying into an obstacle like a sand trap, rough turf, or grove of trees that are along each fairway. We begin each day from the Tee, which is a place where we can set up our ball on a tee so that we have the best possible shot to start the game. Like waking from a night’s rest, we begin each hole anew by teeing up the ball and hitting it down the fairway toward the flag that marks the hole. Around the hole is the “green,” which is short well-groomed grass where the fine strokes called “putting” are made. Like in life, the tee-off and subsequent strokes made on the fairway are gross movements where the ball is hit at great distances. Putting is like the ideal of the Golden Years when all of one’s previous shots have set him or her up to sink the put and move on to the next hole. Therefore, each stroke sends to ball toward the end of the hole, and each hole played is one closer to the end of the game.

While costing the player another stroke on the score card, each stroke is necessary. Each day comes to us at a price, and depending on how we navigate the fairway of life, determines the number of strokes that we pay on that hole. If we play as expected (acting in bad faith), we come out on par for the course with a score of zero—negation (Sartre, 2001). Going along with the flow of life is like hitting the ball a reasonable distance with a sufficient degree of accuracy to the intended area. Poor shots lead to difficult positions on the course and sometimes even land in a pond. In such cases when the ball ends up in a non-playable lie, the player can take a “drop,” which is to say he or she can drop a ball on a playable lie that is in close estimation to where the lost or non-playable ball ended up from the last shot. A drop costs one stroke—there are no freebees.

In sport psychology, golfers often suffer from a fallacy regarding having a good game or a bad game. Inverse to the gambler’s fallacy, which proposes that each loss advances one toward the lucky draw, the golfer’s fallacy is that all of the poor shots before mean that their current stroke will be poorly swung. Like human existence, the objective position one is “thrown” into initially is not of his or her choosing. So one does not determine for himself or herself the layout of the course on which he or she is playing. Rather, each tee is positioned in distance and alignment
with the hole with a variety of obstacles that exist along the fairway or path. However, one's attitude and development of skills does influence the way the ball is hit. That means, the way one hits the ball with regard to aim and skillful impact, is what factors into the energy behind the ball's flight and the spin that can curve its flight toward unintended landings. Consequently, the sport psychologist must get the client to see that it is about one stroke at a time (Marriott & Nilsson, 2004). Where one finds himself or herself on the course is based on the history of previous shots, but is not completely determined by them. The player can still hit this shot well and not make matters worse and might actually improve his or her foundations for subsequent shots. It is about focusing on the now shot and trusting that it will make it to a better position or at least a position that is no worse. One good quality swing with a well-chosen club and the ball is more likely going to go in toward the intended target.

To take the analogy a bit further, there is the matter of the foot-wedge, which is the tongue-in-cheek name for one moving the ball with his or her foot to improve the lie. For non-golfers, a wedge is a type of club that is made for hitting strategically short shots. Let's say that one's ball is sitting a little deep in the grass and a slight push with the foot would prop it up a bit. This is considered cheating. Greater transgressions include actually kicking the ball out from behind a tree or other obstacle. Some cheaters will actually drop a ball surreptitiously out of his or her pocket when the ball has gone off of the fairway and then claim they had found the ball they had hit into that general area.

In an official match, there are authorities to watch for these kinds of offenses. However, the average friendly game can have a collection of foot-wedge shots without scored caps. In life, people cheat in a variety of ways that have a relative severity on the scale of white lies to felonious crimes. These “cheats” cost real strokes, but do not acquire points on the scorecard unless he or she is caught. Either way, at the end of the game, the player knows that the end score lacks some degree of actually reporting the “truth.”

In life, we cheat each other and take advantages that seem to keep us moving down the fairway, but in reality we know how it impacts our truth. Socially, we keep face and pace with the crowd so that we feel the safety and warmth of the herd (Nietzsche, 2011). We may cheat death by escaping an accident or illness, or even some pitfall of our own doing, but we ultimately will end up at our end. So cheating is an attempt to save ourselves on the social scorecard, but we eventually know how we played when we go to the clubhouse for an after round beer. Cheating only gives us an appearance of propriety.

Each shot provides an opportunity to transcend one's position on the course. Each day gives us certain opportunities to play well, play average, or ultimately fail. Avoidant behavior is exercising one's choice not to play and can lead to forfeiture. Anyone can walk off the course at any time at the expense of self-designated losing. People tend to forfeit when they see life through the lens of the golfer's fallacy. "I've started this round off badly, I'll hack the skills of others, and there is no reason to believe this next shot will be any better than the last." However, the good golfers shake off the bad swings and do their best with the present ones.

Like life, each swing of the golf club (whether in practice or a game) leads one to a greater ability to hit the ball well, provided that one seeks to improve his or her swing. That means, each day gives us something to learn from and a variety of choices that will lead us to the next horizon of possibilities. Each lie comes with possibilities and limitations. In life, like in golf, the mind-body integration leads to good goal setting and excellence in actions that lead efficiently to the goals without undo point assessed against one's final score.

Paradise is a game well played. In this life, we have a limited amount of sunlight by which to play. When the sun sets, we can reflect on our game and have a scorecard with which to compare our experience. As William James (2001) describes the stream of experience like the flight of a bird, it is the perch places that we construct the flight out of and not the spans of flying in between them. It is each swing to each lie that marks the game of golf. One's playing well leads to a more enjoyable game that most likely corresponds to a satisfying score at the end of the game for player. Therefore, each shot counts and does become part of the whole experience in reflection, but not in process. Staying in the "now" and trusting the process is the path to success. In life, one must recognize opportunities as perch places upon which his or her choices and actions influence the overall fulfilling outcome.
References

- Rodger Broomé

Today's guest contributor, Rodger Broomé, is a public safety psychologist who graduated from Saybrook University following a 23-year career in police, fire, and emergency medical care.

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COMMENTS AND DISCUSSIONS
Submitted by Mark Yang (not verified) on February 25, 2013 - 12:05am.

I love this article Rodger, especially the part about hope, where there is always the chance to hit a better shot to improve your situation, despite the previous bad shots. Your writing here reminds me of a book titled Golf and the Spirit: Lessons for the Journey by M. Scott Peck that I read a long time ago. This book and your blog here help me to understand why people can be so infatuated with Golf.

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