Fifteen More To Go

If I had invented the game of golf, it would have been the front seven and the back seven. Certainly not eighteen holes. And any stroke within fifty yards of the hole would only count for half. Why in blazes should a stinking putt of thirteen inches count the same as a drive of two hundred yards? Those crazy Scots.

After fourteen holes of golf, I’m tired, sweaty, discouraged and generally in a rotten mood. Every bit of my DNA is focused on how much longer this misery can possibly last. Hmm, four more holes times fifteen minutes per hole…another hour …one more hour out of my life, hacking at that stupid ball.

So why do I play golf? It’s hardly a choice in the business world. Tell a client or associate that you don’t play golf and you’re immediately branded as being hopelessly out of place, especially if you have anything to do with sales or marketing. So, ever since entering the world of business, I’ve been a golfer. Well, I’ve played at being a golfer.

The memory of my first golf game after accepting the job of Sales Engineer for a Midwest manufacturer is sharply etched into my brain. A tournament, organized by the guys in the sales department. To be played at the brand new Pete Dye course just outside of town.

“You bet, sign me up,” I told Dick, the organizer of the tournament. I didn’t own a set of clubs, or golf shoes, or balls, but everybody else in the department was playing, including the Boss. To not play would have been unthinkable.

I overheard one of the other new guys in the department talking about the new set of clubs he’d bought. So as we went through the cafeteria line at lunch, I asked him if he’d traded his old set in.


I told him I’d like to play in the department tournament, but didn’t have any clubs. As he reached for a piece of cherry pie to go with his cheeseburger and fries, he said, “I’ll make you a hell of a deal on those clubs. Two woods, five irons, and a bag- I’ll let you have the whole set for thirty dollars. And, I’ll throw in the balls that are in the bag.”

I told him I’d let him know tomorrow. After all, we were on a tight budget; school loans, the car payment, baby food. I’d have to check with my wife.

She was all for it when I tentatively brought up the subject at supper. “You need to play golf if you are going to get ahead in business. And, you’ll be able to play with Daddy when he visits.”
Her Dad was a passionate golfer. Played any chance he could. He was a natural athlete, and was proud of his game. He’d been after me to take up the game for several years.

So I called Ron and told him he had a deal, that I’d have the check the next day. He agreed to bring the clubs to work.

The next day at lunch, we went out to his car. He opened the trunk and pulled out a faded red canvas bag with a brown leather strap. The clubs were probably twenty years old, he said. “Bought ‘em used when I was in college. They’re a little scuffed, but I’ve hit some damned fine shots with those. They’ll do you a good job.” I gave him my check.

I’d played softball and baseball in school and had found it natural to swing left handed, even though I’m right-handed in everything else I do. Later that evening, after supper, I took my new clubs out to the back yard, behind the wretchedly hot apartments we lived in, along with other new hires at the Company. I took the driver out, and discovered it was a right-handed club.

Rats. I hadn’t even thought of that little detail. Shoulda asked. But, I thought, let’s give her a try. I assumed what I thought to be a proper golf stance and swung the club right handed. Holy Smoke, I thought. That’s the most unnatural thing I’ve ever tried. How could anyone on the planet ever swing right-handed? I tried several more times, that sinking feeling getting worse with each swing.

My friend John came out of his apartment, carrying a cup of coffee. It was still about 90 degrees. John was in baggy plaid Bermuda shorts, a white tee shirt and was bare footed. His two-year old daughter, clad in a diaper, followed him, one tiny hand hanging onto the leg of his Bermudas.

“New set of clubs, eh?” John was from Wisconsin, and had that clipped way of talking.

“Yeah, new to me, anyway. Bought ‘em today. Trouble is, I really think I need left-handed clubs. Swinging right handed just isn’t natural.”

John grinned, sat his coffee cup down on the concrete slab that was our back stoop, and popped a pacifier in his daughter’s mouth. He took the driver from me, looked at it and said, “There’s no such thing as a good left-handed golfer. Golf was intended to be played right-handed. Forget that left-handed stuff. Just watch me.”

He took the stance. Paused. Brought the club back smoothly and swung viciously. “Not bad,” he said examining the club head, his thinning blond hair matted to his forehead in the clinging humidity. ”These clubs have some great shots left in ‘em. You playing in the sales tournament?”

I told him I was. “But John,” I said, “I don’t have any golf shoes. Are tennis shoes okay?”
John retrieved his coffee cup and his little daughter, who was concentrating on her pacifier. He turned to me with a grin and said, “They call ‘em tennis shoes for a reason. You really need a set of golf cleats to anchor your stance.”

He swung his little daughter up and around to straddle his neck and started toward his apartment. ”See you tomorrow,” he said in that Wisconsin twang.

Anchor my stance? What, I was gonna be in danger of sliding off the golf course? Here I was, a lefty with a set of right-handed clubs. It was Wednesday. I had two days to master a right-handed golf swing. It was 4 days until payday, and now I needed golf shoes so as not to be branded a complete nincompoop. What a stupid situation to be in.

And they call golf a game? My stomach was already starting to knot up.

Saturday. Tournament day.

The Sales Department Outing started at 11:00 am. I left our apartment at around 9, hoping to get some time on the driving range. I hadn’t yet mastered the right-handed swing, And I didn’t have golf cleats. Maybe no one would notice I was wearing my U.S. Keds.

I packed my red canvas bag with nine clubs in the back seat of our ’59 Renault Dauphine and headed out to the golf course. Maybe I’ll get in a traffic accident and won’t be able to make it in time to play, I thought to myself. Or maybe it’ll rain.

A quick glance at the cloudless sky was stark assurance that rain was nowhere in sight. Crap. I was gonna have to play.

I pulled into the parking lot, found a space for the Renault and got out. All around me, the other sales department guys were unloading their clubs and changing into their golf shoes. The knot in my stomach tightened. These guys looked like they couldn’t wait to get on the golf course.

There was Bill, who had the Steelcase desk right in front of me at the office. He was leaning against his Buick, lacing up his saddle patterned golf shoes. A professional looking leather bag of clubs was propped against his car. Over there, my friend John, already outfitted in his black golf shoes (no socks), his full set of clubs attesting to his ability.

I took my little red canvas golf bag out of the car and walked over to where Bill was tying the knot in his shoe. I hoped against hope he wouldn’t mention my black U.S. Keds.

“Looks like a great day for golf, Bill,” I said trying to sound confident and cheerful, but feeling nothing but dread. Why couldn’t it rain?
Bill looked me up and down. He had on crisp black Bermudas, with a white golf shirt, and a lightweight, sleeveless pullover. I had chosen my favorite cutoffs, a light green t-shirt, and white wool socks under my Keds. I thought I detected a slight smirk as he reached for his golf bag.

“Any day on the golf course is a good day,” he said. ”By the way, what’s your handicap?”

Handicap? I could think of any number of handicaps. Never having played a round of golf was probably a handicap. Right-handed clubs and a left-handed swing probably qualified. How about a case of nerves that had me on the verge of throwing up? Was that a handicap?

But I said, “Bill I actually don’t think I have an official handicap.”

“I assumed as much,” Bill said casually. ”Maybe you’ll get with some other guys who are just starting out, and you can get some practice.”

I relaxed a little. Surely there were some other guys who were just starting out, and I could play with them.

When we got to the clubhouse, I looked at the Official Pairings. I was in a foursome with Bill, John, and my Boss. My stomach knotted. I felt the panic build. Please God, just strike me dead here. Why allow me to suffer through five hours of certain agony?

No such luck. No lightning bolts. No comets streaking down from the heavens to take me out of my misery. I walked over to where the carts were parked, arranged in the order we were to tee off. I tried to blend in with the crowd of boisterous, laughing golfers, all of whom seemed anxious to get started. I, on the other hand, kept hoping for an attack of appendicitis or maybe an earthquake to put this off till another day- or forever.

I found my foursome. Bill in his spiffy togs talking to Fred, my boss, as he loaded his clubs onto Fred’s cart. Good old Bill never missed an opportunity to suck up to management. Fred was attired in black slacks, a white golf shirt, and a stylish sleeveless black sweater, his black golf shoes gleaming.

I put my red canvas bag of clubs on the cart next to John’s, and took a minute to look at John’s arsenal: Four woods, in knitted University of Wisconsin socks with tassels; a full set of irons; a water ball retriever and an umbrella. Brushes and towels hung from loops on the bag. All he was missing was an M-1 in case we encountered the Viet Cong in the sand traps. John was on the practice green, concentrating on putt after putt.

Maybe that’s what I need, I thought to myself. Maybe a little practice would relieve the….. Ah, shit! I didn’t have any golf balls! In my worry over having to play, I had completely forgotten to get to K-Mart for golf balls and tees.
I hollered over to John, “I’ll be right back. Gotta run up to the clubhouse for a sec!” As I turned, I could see John scowl at me for missing a putt. Loosen up John, I thought. It’s just a game.

Four dollars and fifty cents for three balls? (It was 1967, remember.) Good night. I’d have to take my lunch from home all next week. Better get at least six, I thought. I’d heard there were some water holes on the course, and they kept talking about the high rough. With a little bag of tees, I left the clubhouse, just over ten dollars lighter in the pocket.

I got back to the carts where John, Fred and Bill were laughing about something. I took some comfort from John’s attire. Like me, John looked like he was ready for yard work. John was a big man; about six- four, and his college football muscle was turning beefy. He had on wrinkled khaki shorts, a white tee shirt, but at least he had real golf shoes with cleats. I could feel my face redden as Fred glanced down at my U.S. Keds.

“I didn’t know you were a golfer, Ed,” said Fred, with a smile.

“Well, I haven’t played much,” I replied, trying to match his easy banter. “Just got my first set of clubs. John gave me a tip or two.” From the corner of my eye, I could see a look of surprise cross John’s face, but he didn’t say anything.

The announcement came from the clubhouse, over the loudspeaker. The tournament was about to start. There were six- foursomes, and we’d all tee off on the number one hole. It was suddenly and starkly clear to me that mine was the first foursome. That meant we’d tee off with every member of the sales department watching. Twenty- three sets of eyes were on me as I hit my first ever tee shot. My stomach knotted. My legs turned to jelly, and I suddenly felt I had to have a bowel movement. But it was too late.

“Fred’s group on the tee box please,” came the metallic sounding announcement from the clubhouse. Fred walked confidently up to the marker, stooped to place his ball on the tee, and straightened up.

He’s wearing a glove, I thought to myself. Just one glove. I glanced around. All the guys had a glove on their left hand. Guess I really should have read up on golf before now, I thought.

Fred took his stance and smoothly drove his shot straight down the fairway, a beautiful golf shot. “Ah, crap!” said Fred as he watched his ball roll to a stop. “I pulled it.” He picked up his tee and walked toward us, clearly unhappy about his shot.

Man, I thought, if I could hit a shot like that, I’d commit my life to the Lord, give up swearing, and go to Church every Sunday. If Fred was unhappy with it, I wondered what a good shot looked like?
Bill was next. He looked the part of a seasoned and well-decked out professional. He casually teed up and stepped back to line up his shot. One practice swing, and then he drilled his ball past Fred’s. The waiting golfers roared their approval. “Great shot Bill, close to three hundred yards.”

John looked at me questioningly, but I nodded for him to go ahead. My knees were shaking so hard that I had to lean against the bench for support. My bowels were bubbling. Had to be nerves, I thought. Maybe there was a toilet at the first green.

John sauntered up to the tee, his linebacker confidence showing in his swagger and the look of determination on his face. He jammed his ball and tee into the ground, straightened and took a full and ferocious practice swing. He hollered over to Bill, “Watch this Alice.” Then he blasted his shot a full 40 yards beyond Bill’s. He grinned broadly as Fred and the other guys whistled and slapped his shoulders.

Fred turned to me. “Okay, Eddie, lets get another one out there.”

Please, God, just let me hit it straight and at least to the fairway.

I pushed away from the bench and walked haltingly to the tee. Was that my appendix about to let go? No, I decided, just my bowels cramping.

I tried to put my tee in the ground. My hand was shaking so badly I couldn’t get the ball to stay on the tee. I got down on one knee and, using both hands, finally got it teed up. I straightened up. The crowd was still. I could feel every eye on me, on my U.S. Keds, on my cutoffs, on my gloveless hand. I took what I thought was the stance and took a practice swing.

My club hit the ground hard, sending shock waves up my arms and across my shoulders, hard enough to rock the ball off the tee with the vibration. I heard some of the guys chuckle.

“Go ahead, Eddie, we won’t count that one,” Fred said.

I got the ball back on the tee. I decided against a practice swing. Instead, I pulled the club back and swung with everything I had…and this time missed the ball completely. It sat there on the tee, undisturbed. Some of the guys turned to hide their grins and stifle their laughter.

Now I was a complete wreck. Two attempts in front of my friends, my boss. I had to hit that ball. Almost blindly, I swung again. This time I felt contact. I opened my eyes, looked down the fairway to find my ball.

“Hey, Ed,” one of the guys in the back yelled, “you almost made it to the women’s tee.” Even Fred joined in the laughter.
I walked down the tee box to where my ball had stopped and started to hit it again.

“Tee off from the white tees!” ordered the metallic voice over the loudspeaker.

“That’s his fourth shot!” yelled back one of the guys in the crowd. That did it. The group now roared with laughter. I tried to laugh with them, but inside, I wanted to disappear in a blast of fire and smoke, like the witch in Oz.

Mercifully, I hit the ball with the next attempt, and it made it to the fringe of the fairway. “That one’s in play, Eddie,” Fred said in encouragement.

Wonderful. Only seventeen more holes to go.

Some people must be born with a bunch of athletic genes that are absolutely absent in my DNA. I have never mastered the game of golf, in spite of hacking around for almost 40 years. And, unlike those happy Callaway-armed fanatics who drool over the prospect of a 7:00 AM tee time every Saturday, I don’t enjoy it. But, if you are a fast-talking, back slapping sales guy, you gotta play golf, right? At least, that’s what I’d always thought.

My father-in-law, Houston, was an avid golfer. Played twice a week, and entered every tournament he came across. He was a natural athlete, a great basketball player in his day, a deadly slam shot on the ping-pong table, and nearly a scratch golfer. So, anytime we’d visit the in-laws, I was obligated to play in his foursome. We played at his course built into the rolling hills of West Virginia. The course had been built on land that had been a farm. And the course designer had left a barn on the edge of the third fairway, a big barn, the old fashioned kind with a haymow on the upper floor and a big window on both ends of the mow.

The first time I played that course with Houston, that barn gave Houston yet another excuse to critique my attempt at golf. Houston’s tee shot was a beauty, landing in the fairway just beyond the edge of the barn. I, on the other hand, was just short of the barn after two dreadful, but by now standard, shots from the tee. The fairway broke left beyond the barn to the green, a five iron away from where Houston’s ball had come to rest. From where my ball was, the barn was directly between me and the green.

“What’s the best way for me to approach the green?” I called out to Houston. He was waiting impatiently for me to pull up my socks and play golf.

“Hell,” he responded, “from where you are the shortest way is to go through the hay mow.”

He was kidding. I took him seriously.
I looked at the opening to the haymow, about fifty feet away and fifteen feet up. I could see the opening on the far end of the barn. Must be how all the locals do it, I thought.

For the first time that day, my club connected perfectly. The ball soared straight for the barn, following that satisfying “click” that announces a well hit ball. My ball slammed into the front of the barn and bounced straight back at me, missing me by several feet and rolling almost all the way back to the tee box. The foursome waiting to tee off just stared at the ball, then me, shaking their heads.

“What in blazes are you doing?” hollered Houston, driving up in his cart. “You aimed right at the barn!” He was shaking his head in disgust.

“You told me to go through the haymow,” I replied. My face reddened as I heard the guys on the tee laughing at my stupidity.

Houston kept shaking his head, “If I told you to wipe your rear end with a broken bottle, would you do it?”

I walked back to get my ball thinking golf was perhaps the most over-rated, stupid game on the planet.

Golf intimidates me. Rather, I allow myself to be intimidated by it. But with my experience so far, I have good reason to be intimidated. I am truly capable of making a complete and total ass of myself on the golf course.

I’m King of the Driving Range! Get me get out on the range with a bucket of balls, and no pressure, and I can hit the ball a mile. Straight, like Tiger. Chip, like Arnold Palmer.

But, get me on the first tee, with three pairs of eyes watching my every move, and I get as uptight as a first timer facing a proctology exam. I freeze up like the Tin Man in a driving rainstorm. Especially in one of those dreaded business scrambles where you are likely to get paired with three complete strangers. And with my luck, they are strangers who probably live to play golf.

I have enjoyed playing from time to time, believe it or not. When I first started playing golf, I played Saturdays with my pal Jack, and two other good ol’ boys whose names are long since forgotten. We’d get to a small public course in southern Indiana around 9:00, play golf, drink beer, and to hell with keeping score. My kinda golf! Why can’t it be like that all the time?

Then there are my pals Don, Truman, and Jim. Good golfers. Take the game seriously, every one of them. They all shoot in the 80’s. Practice all the time. But I enjoy playing with them. They have patience, and encourage me. If I hit a duffer shot (If? How about every other shot?), they just casually say, “Slow down your swing next time,” or
something else helpful like that. Those guy’s are a rarity in golf, guys who just enjoy being on the course.

If only the world was full of Dons, Trumans, or Jims.

Golf is full of anal-retentive types. I played with a business associate a few years back, a guy I needed to get to know better. We played at his club on a cold, blustery day. (As much as I hated to play golf anyway, I REALLY hate to play in the cold.)

At the end of the first hole, Mike, who was keeping score, asked me what I had.

“I think I have a seven,” I answered, honestly. (Who could keep track of all these swings?)

“No, Ed, you had an eight.” Then Mike proceeded to tick off every shot I’d hit on that first hole.

Jeez…. 

The next hole was a par three over a small lake. Mike laid up on the green, within five feet of the cup.

My shot dropped unceremoniously in the middle of the lake. A typical Ed Friel shot. Guess Mike will want to count that one just like in real golf. Damn, I hate this stupid game.