

Personal Insights from the Old Pueblo Group

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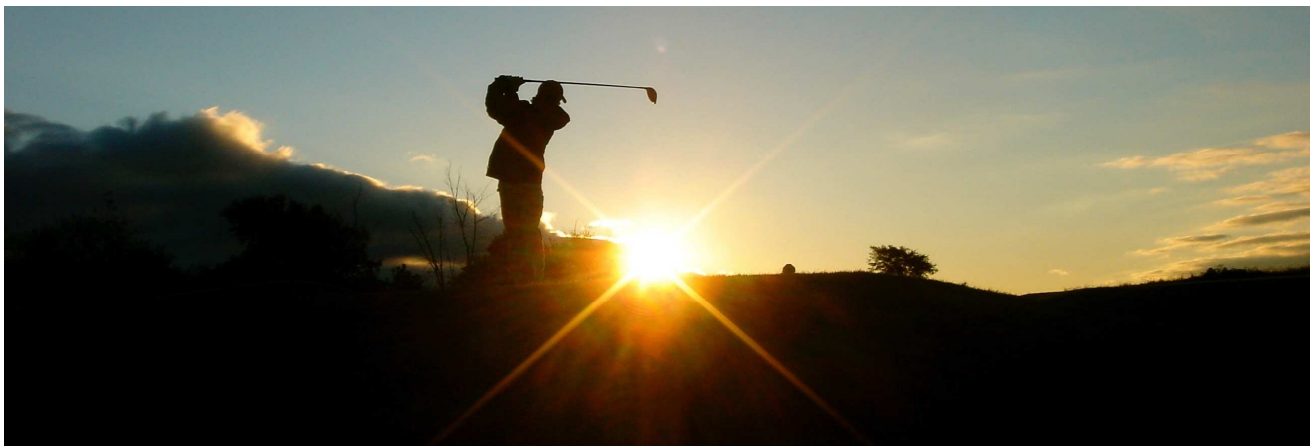
The Greatest Game

From the Tee Box - Fernando Arreola

There is something magical about playing golf first thing in the morning. The smell of freshly mowed grass, the cool clean damp air, and the sounds of birds chirping as you stand on the 1st tee provide such a calming rush. It is truly amazing and the lessons I've learned from golf have become a core part of who I am.

I was first introduced to golf when I was 15. Looking for an opportunity to gain my youthful independence, I jumped on an offering by my neighbor to work at their golf course, The Lake Forest Golf Club in Ann Arbor Michigan. It was the perfect first job as I was eager to start earning money and have always enjoyed being outdoors. Over time, I developed many wonderful relationships, learned the importance of work ethic and took such great pride in every task that I stayed for seven years including summers in college. At one point, I knew how to do every job: I bussed tables, cleaned golf carts, checked in golfers, sold merchandise, and even mowed greens and tee boxes. I felt like I was the king of the course. However, my favorite job was changing the holes out on the greens. I took great pride in knowing that, depending on where the hole was placed that day, I would directly influence the difficulty of the course and the players' experience.

Shortly after starting at Lake Forest, I caught the "golf bug" and began taking full advantage of my free golf employee benefits. If I was not at school, or had work to do, you could find me at the driving range or on the course using what random clubs I could find. After saving up some money I purchased a set of used golf clubs, and with the help of my two best friends began to learn the game. I remember playing until dusk in the summer, which in the Midwest is around 9:30. As the sun went down, we would have difficulty seeing our golf balls and had to listen for the splash if we missed the ninth or eighteenth green which shared a pond. I spent countless hours on the putting and chipping greens practicing my short game. I would lose track of time and would get lost in my imagination visualizing different shots and situations that I could face. Needless to say, I was hooked.



Fernando at Lake Forest Golf Club where it all started

Over time I began to develop a solid swing and started to take golf more seriously. My mentor, Coach Sean, said I should consider playing professionally. Something I had never thought of or had even contemplated, but it gave me a goal to work towards and from that moment on I started playing competitively and with purpose. Even while as student at Michigan State, I worked at Forest Akers, the University's golf course, and continued honing my craft. The heated driving range allowed me to practice during the brutal Michigan winters while preparing for the upcoming season. Over the next nine years, I began playing in tournaments across the state, region and world and even played for the chance to make the pro circuit. I played a lot of golf at some incredible courses and met amazing people along the way. It was an experience, and I loved it.

A typical round of golf takes four and a half hours and is played as a foursome. I have always enjoyed playing with new people and hearing their stories. Naturally, you get to know your playing partners very well. What they do, where they're from, what their family is like. Something I have always found fascinating is how you can really get a feel for someone's character by playing a round of golf with them. Do they finish the hole every time, or do they give up and pick up their ball after an errant golf shot? Do they play by the rules? Are they "fluffers" which in golf terminology means they "fluff" or move the ball's position to make the shot less difficult.

Golf can be as complicated or as simple as you want to make the game. I have worked with several swing coaches, each with their own teaching style. Some are more technical than others. They use video with lines and angles all over your body telling you precisely where each part of your body needs to be throughout the entire golf swing. I have found this approach overwhelming as the average golf swing takes place in 1.2 seconds. For me, less is more so, the coach I actually gained the most insight from taught from a different perspective. She focused on the mental aspect of the game and would ask questions such as, "what were you thinking before the shot?" She worked to prevent negative self-talk such as "don't hit it in the water", and thus you proceed to hit it into the water. She understood that your body replicates what your mind creates and worked with me to change my perspective. That was a game changer for me and I immediately noticed improvement in my play. You want to focus in on your target and what you want to accomplish, not where you do not want to end up. Much like we should approach our goals in life. The parallels between golf and life are endless.

Bobby Jones, famous amateur golfer and golf figure, once said "golf is played on a five-and-a-half-inch course, the space between your ears." A mistake that many rookies make is that they compete against the golf course instead of where the actual challenge lies, controlling their emotions. Not every shot will be perfect; in fact, most are not. One must learn to accept the results and move on as dwelling on past mistakes or errors doesn't allow you to unleash your true potential. Accepting where your ball currently lies allows you to free up your body and creates mental space to address the task at hand. If you are worried about your score, or are anxious about where your ball will end up prior to taking your swing, your body will mirror that stress, become tense and you will struggle to make a nice fluid stroke.

However, the most important lesson I learned from golf is Presence. Rather than focusing on the myriad of possible outcomes of this shot, or the next hole, or even my score, I now focus entirely on being present with the current swing. Having a disciplined preshot routine allows me to do just that. Your preshot routine should be something that you can easily replicate with every stroke. Being consistent is particularly important under pressure situations, difficult lies, or unknown course hazards. It serves as a distraction from the outcome or the future and places an emphasis on the present. My routine starts before I even address the ball. First, I choose a specific target in the distance. The more detailed this target is the better. It needs to be something I can easily see and focus on along the path I want the ball to travel. For example, a tree branch in the distance, a chimney, a certain peak in the mountain range, or even the flag itself. As I find that target, I stand behind the ball and visualize the swing required to get the result I am seeking. Then I pick another reference point a couple of inches directly in front of the golf ball that is in line with my more distant target. While focusing on that point, I step up to the ball, align my club face and plant my feet. I glance at my target, give the club a few waggles to release any tension in my arms, inhale calmly, check my target one last time and fire! By being fully present when utilizing this technique I now accept the result knowing that I executed my preshot routine to the best of my ability which in turn creates the highest probability of success. The idea is that you can only control the ingredients of what goes into the swing up to the point of contact. Once the ball leaves the face of the club, you no longer have input and physics takes over.

As I learned more and more about golf I learned about Hall of Fame Golfer Ben Hogan. Ben dominated the golf world throughout the 1940s and 1950s and I could not help but be intrigued by his story. Amongst those he knew, he was called 'The Hawk', a nickname attributed to him because of his love to practice and play with laser

focus. Ever humble, he would often say that he was not the most talented player, or the most gifted, but that his edge was the result of outworking the field. It clearly was his strength for he went on to win 64 times on the PGA Tour, placing him 4th all time. In the midst of his success in 1949, he was involved in an awful car accident and suffered serious injuries and fractures as a result. This included a fractured collarbone, pelvis, ankle, as well as major bruising and contusions. The damages were so bad that it was very unlikely that he would walk again, let alone play golf. One year later he miraculously won the US Open in an eighteen hole playoff. A win that came at the cost of terrible agony throughout the tournament as his legs were bandaged up from waist to ankles to control the swelling while giving him some mobility and stability.

His work ethic and tenacity have always inspired me. I love that, although golf requires some physical ability, the mind plays a more significant role. With time, professional golfers have become more athletic in order to keep up with the competition, manage overuse injuries, and help with endurance. It wasn't always that way and Ben was a great example of that bygone era where simple guts and determination could conquer all. However, one thing that has remained the same is that, regardless of talent or athleticism, it is mental toughness that separates the best from the field.

It still amazes me how a summer job turned into a passion. Since I started working at Lake Forest Golf Club, golf has been an important part of my life. Even though I no longer play seven days a week like I used to, I have a group of friends I play with regularly and I still enjoy all aspects that this wonderful sport offers. I am forever grateful to my neighbor who gave me the opportunity to work at her course as it exposed me to the world of golf. Apart from countless life lessons, golf has also served as an escape. When I am on the golf course, it is as if all my worries go away. I think about the smell of the grass, the fresh air, the warm sun. I love the challenge of visualizing a golf shot and the satisfaction of executing it perfectly. Which, for the record, is not always!

“Golf is deceptively simple and endlessly complicated; it satisfies the soul and frustrates the intellect. It is at the same time rewarding and maddening – and it is without a doubt the greatest game mankind has ever invented.”

- Arnold Palmer