

Blast from the past – # 3 of 2011: “Spanking whitey”

Continuing our best of 2011 blogs with #3:

Golf, or as my friend sometimes calls it, “spanking whitey” (hey I don’t make ‘em up, I just report ‘em), is the ultimate mind-games sport. It’s terrible and terrific. Exciting and exasperating. Frustrating and fun. And all of that can come on a single hole.

Whoever created the concept of hitting a tiny round object with a flat piece of metal with the expectation of having it go where you want was either a genius or a sadist. Or both.

The magical mystery tour of golf for the non-professional is the ultimate tease. A moment of tantalizing perfection balanced against hours of excruciating near misses.

My own journey started out simply enough. Back in my early teens, Dad would take me out to a small 9-hole course, of which there were several in South Florida at the time. I played with three clubs, a 4-wood, a 9-iron and a putter. Fortunately Dad was a lefty, so I could use some of his old clubs (a couple which still had letters on them from the days when they had names like “spoon” and “bonnie”).

One time, as we were playing a par “4” (generous, since these were usually no more than 240 yards), I was about 120 yards short of the hole in the middle of the fairway (I used to hit the ball straight back then). Using the only iron I had, I watched my shot sail up into the air, bounce once and roll into the cup for an eagle. Gee, this game is easy!

When I was going to college at the University of Florida, students could play the campus course for cheap (I think it was \$2). It was a walking only course, with the final hole on

an uphill slant. I can't remember how long it was, but after 17 previous holes walking in the smothering Gainesville weather (no sea breezes like down here in South FLA), it felt like that last one was the end of a marathon. And if it rained! Slogging up that fairway lugging your bag of clubs...whew. Still, I could regularly shoot in the 80's back then.

As the years passed and I read more about golf and how to do it correctly, my game went as far south as my scores went north. The saying "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing" must surely have originally been coined by a golfer. In the course of that period, I had also developed a mighty slice. Not just a slice, but a *mighty* slice! In my vacuum of information on how to fix my slice (a lot of great info for righties out there but it's tough enough to learn golf without remembering to turn all the instructions around), I continuously aimed further and further right in an attempt to "play the slice". To help the uninitiated picture this, the lefty golfer as he prepares to hit a golf ball is facing to the left of the fairway. In a slice, the ball begins to curve away from the golfer, going right to left. So now imagine me turning my body so that I'm nearly facing straight up the fairway, trying to hit the ball far enough right so that the curve takes me back in the fairway. This concept works as long as there are none of those tall, leafy things known as trees. Which means it works on about 1% of all golf holes in the world.

Despite this problem, I continued to golf sporadically for many years, my scores hovering in the low 90's with an extremely rare dip into the upper 80's. Over the last ten years, though, my golfing outings have dropped down to less than a dozen a year, sometimes less. Over that time I was given some lessons with a pro as a birthday gift. He taught me how to get rid of my slice and suggested a practice and playing regimen to keep improving. Needless to say, he did

not suggest only golfing roughly once a month.

Just today I was out on the golf course with some friends. It was an expectedly awful first nine holes as I tried to remember and process all those tips I had been taught about my swing. Ultimately, by the second nine, I got my driver under control and made a few putts, but my irons were catastrophic and I don't want to mention my unfortunate stay at the beach. Still and all, I finished the back with a 47, putting me right back at my mid-90's average. All I could hope for with not having played since last year.

Each time I go out, I'm sure it will be my last. I'm capable and successful at tennis, which is not only more exercise but a whole lot cheaper. But there is always one hole, just one hole, where the game of golf plays with you. The sweet swing off the tee that puts you in the middle of the fairway; an accidentally precise iron shot that sidles up near the hole and then a putt that just breathes on the cup and could fall in or lip out, depending on how much of a tease the game wanted to be that day. And in that moment, that perfect moment of consecutive shots, you are left with the belief (falsely) that you can actually play this game. And it could all fall apart the next hole, but that one moment stays with you, compelling you to subject yourself to one more round of spanking whitey.

Because *that* round is the one where you are going to have 18 perfect moments and shoot the round of your life. Like the lotto, I'm still waiting.