

The High Cost of Playing Golf

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by Gene Sager

When I was considering how to spend my vacation time – a year off from work, a sabbatical – my friend had one word for me: “Golf.” He said that since my nickname is “Green Gene,” I would enjoy the natural setting of a golf course. He contrasted golf with racket ball, saying the latter sport traps you in a concrete box.

I told my friend I would think about taking up golf and I even went to play the front nine at a local course. I found out that the course was the subject of some controversy ten years ago; a pristine native canyon was destroyed to build it. It is now 150 acres of non-native grass and trees, mowed and trimmed regularly. It is not really a “natural setting,” but it is pretty. The beauty of the course is somewhat disrupted by the golf carts purring about, speeding things up and sparing players the exercise they might have gotten.

A truly natural setting would have native plants flourishing as parts of the native ecosystem, including the insects, birds, and animals that go with it. By contrast, a golf course is a monoculture: Only the imposed set of plants are allowed, thus mitigating the biodiversity of the area.

I was still prepared to give golf a chance. Even if golf courses are not really natural, they are at least a welcome break from crowded housing areas, malls and freeways. So I set out to do research on golf courses. The following two well-documented cases gave me pause.

U.S. Navy Lieutenant George Prior, age 30, died after playing golf on three successive days at the Army Navy Country Club in Arlington, Virginia in August, 1982. At first he had headaches and nausea, then a severe rash; finally his organs shut down and he died of a heart attack. Medical experts agreed that he died because of exposure to Daconil 2787 – a fungicide which was sprayed on the brown spots on the greens.

Among the many cases involving claims about chemical poisoning is that of the famous golf pro Billy Casper. Over a 20-year period, Casper says he suffered from symptoms including headaches, nausea and undue loss of energy. Doctors diagnosed his condition as “pesticide poisoning.” Casper correlated his symptoms with “heavily sprayed golf courses.”

Some golf courses did use less poison as a response to public outrage about such cases. But temporary green gestures by

greenskeepers do not show us their true colors. Caution by greenskeepers varies over time, depending on media coverage and especially in response to political currents. Although there may be some truly green golf courses, my best advice for golfers today is: “Beware.”

The issue that finalized my decision about golfing was the use of water on golf courses. Even in the rare locations where there is usually sufficient precipitation, the greens are a special problem. Greens are a kind of artificial environment because they are very closely cropped and subjected to extremely high levels of foot traffic. (As the saying goes, even the world’s worst duffer finally walks onto the green.) So when there is a pause in the usual precipitation rate, heavy watering is required on 18 greens. Waterwise, golf courses are always a threat to our supply.

Water shortages are a global problem today. In the U.S., 36 states will be facing water shortages this year. The most outrageous situations are in California, Arizona and New Mexico where there is simply not enough water for golf courses. Water is piped in at great cost in order to create a “golfing oasis.” While residents of Albuquerque are subjected to water rationing laws, the very existence of golf courses seems absurd.

Golf advocates point to the fact that some courses drill their own wells and even use grey water. But wells further deplete our precious aquifers and public parks should be given priority when the limited amount of high grade grey water is allocated. Parks are for everyone but golf courses are for the special use of a minority – a minority of adults who want to play golf and who can afford the greens fees.

I priced the greens fees at courses near my home in southern California. A round of golf costs at least \$50 and golfers complain that the fees are rising ahead of the cost of living. But surely we must consider environmental costs as well. Golf courses incur a major cost to the environment and hence to us all. If I play golf, I exercise a dubious privilege in a world beset with problems of dwindling wilderness, chemical pollution and shortage of precious natural resources. All considered, I would have to say that the old stereotype of the golfer as a member of a privileged elite has new validity today. I told my one-word-golf friend that I have one word for him: “No.”

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