

Driving to the Boardroom

Golf is a character-revealing game of nerve, manners, and strategy. The author goes golfing and finds how business gets done and undone on the links.

Beth Ramos is the operations manager of the Pebble Beach Golf Academy in Monterey, Calif., and so one could reasonably think that she is advancing her own agenda when she makes a statement like this: "If you take up golf, you've just added as much to your résumé as Harvard Business School, and if you walk into your office and say, 'I just got back from Pebble Beach,' every head will turn and you'll have a new credibility."

But Ramos, 51, wasn't always in golf. She used to be in commercial real estate, and one day, she says, "I realized that I was the only one in the office, while all the men were on the golf course." Like most women, she wouldn't think to take the time out from her workday to spend the couple hundred bucks that a high-end golf outing usually entails. "I know women who spend \$150 or more getting their hair done," Ramos says, "but I've never known anyone to get a promotion from getting her hair done."

Ramos took her first lesson in 1984; one thing led to another, eventually leading her to Pebble Beach, and now she sees the resort's Golf Academy not as a recreational facility but as a kind of finishing school for discerning executives. Sure enough, golf is much more important in business than anyone lets on. In a survey of Fortune 500 chief executive officers, 98 percent described themselves as golfers. Consider also the 150 or so private military golf courses in the country, and you have a scenario in which golfers pretty much control the resources and defenses of the Free World. These stats explain why the Golf Academy at Pebble Beach hosts golf clinics for corporations and arranges what it calls "outings" (rounds of golf for corporate executives) for 900 companies every year. Some of these are working retreats, while others are doled out as incentive rewards.

The academy also offers special programs to introduce women executives to golf, but it's not working; as Ramos diplomatically puts it, "a very interesting percentage [of golfers at Pebble Beach] are not women." Thus, the resort is in the process of building a spa. It's a shame, really, because golf isn't nearly as mysterious or boring as most women seem to think it is.

The real reason men of industry play golf isn't because it's a sport, but because it's a simulacrum of the boardroom, a quasispiritual forum for the stretching of the mental reflexes. As a game, it's more like chess or bridge than tennis or baseball. But unlike card and board games, it has a moral dimension. Beneath the pastels and plaids, the highballs and the mixed grills, great men play golf for the same reasons they read *The Prince* or *The Art of War*—to achieve and maintain the moral and intellectual conditioning that befits their professional and economic station. Golf is good for this because it's difficult. It might even be the most difficult game ever devised by mankind. Which brings me to a startling revelation.

1. NOBODY, MALE OR FEMALE, IS ANY GOOD AT GOLF.

It's true, and once you can make yourself believe this, golf will no longer intimidate you. Even Tiger Woods isn't as good at golf as the rankest AAA rookie is at playing shortstop. That's because golf is harder to play than baseball, basketball, tennis, or even Scrabble. It's unheard of for even the best golfer to win more than a handful of tournaments in a season. Nongolfers are confused when they see the player who won the Masters at Augusta bomb out at the U.S. Open, but this is normal. The best golfers commonly fail to make the

final cut in the first two days of elimination play.

Golf can't be mastered, even by a master. Pro golfers have no multiyear contracts—no form of tenure whatsoever—and if they have a bad year, they go back to qualifying school, where they vie for slots in the pro tour alongside promising amateurs. That's how hard it is. The reason so many pro athletes maintain a fervent interest in amateur golf long after they've begun to treat their own sport as an onerous dayjob is that golf is endlessly frustrating and challenging.

For business purposes, the hardest part of playing golf is not the physical rigors of the sport, I have come to learn, but its interpersonal nuances. For golf is a contest of wits, a proof of character.

A little over a year ago, Tere Throenle, the 37-year-old chief financial officer of SeaWest Financial, a \$110 million company in Paramount, California, that finances cars, didn't play golf, but then she realized what she was missing—namely the weekly rounds she now plays with SeaWest's chief executive. That's four or five hours a week spent with the head of her company in a relaxed, bucolic social setting. The benefits of such an arrangement were readily apparent to Tere, and she approached it as she would any other critical project.

"I grew up playing music, and this game is just as complex as playing guitar or piano, so I decided to put the same level of effort into it," Tere says. So now, in addition to the weekly outings with the Pooh-Bah, she hits the driving range twice a week and has lessons every other week.

When I called Tere to talk about golf, she immediately suggested a Friday outing. "I'll put together a foursome," she said, "and we can go chase the little white pill around."

I liked hearing a woman sling the lingo with such confidence, and as I learn upon arriving at Strawberry Farms, a brand-new, pristine public course in Orange County, Tere's golfing manners are positively courtly. She makes the introductions and gives each of us complimentary golf tees and ball markers imprinted with the logo of her company and a sleeve of Titleist balls—the kind you don't want to hit into the water hazard—as party favors. As a hostess she is completely in charge of the day, establishing the tone, but there's nothing Joan Crawford about her hospitality. I once knew a wealthy widow who held indoor/outdoor dinners with the same generous amiability, where you felt extremely welcome and at the same time truly impressed with the occasion. Let's just say I've seldom felt this cared for on my birthday, and Tere has clearly thrown herself into the study of golfing chivalry with as much committed zeal as she puts into her game.

Our two other members are Irene Kinoshita, the 48-year-old president and chief executive of Ascolta Training, which teaches workers how to use Cisco Systems hardware and software, and Martha Daniel, also 48, the president and chief executive of IMRI, a company that helps other companies do business on the Web. Irene is an

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accomplished golfer. She and her husband belong to the Dove Canyon Country Club and play two times a week, and she started an informal group of women golfers, all CEOs, who get together for golf once a month. Martha has been playing for less than a year, has two teenage sons and little time for the game, but appreciates its resonance in her universe. Norma Soleno-DeVaney, the chief financial officer of IMRI and a friend of Tere's, rides along on the first nine holes as a curious observer before she has to leave to catch her daughter's soccer game. (Norma is what the golf industry calls a "latent golfer," one who doesn't play but whose nongolfing facade is showing cracks.)

This is Tere's home course, and she gamely discusses strategies on difficult holes without ever appearing to offer advice. When I hit my third tee shot onto the paved path, she says, "I love hitting the cart path right there, because when you take your free drop it always rolls right down onto the fairway." Not a whiff of condescension, and she never so much as hints that I should pick up my ball when I hit it into the barranca three times in a row. The art of hosting a golf outing is a field of study in itself, and it's true what they say: You can tell a lot about a person's character by observing her behavior on the golf course. If I had any use for a CFO, I'd hire Tere away from SeaWest on the spot.

Late in the 18 holes I realize that I have never once been the person tending the flag at the cup. Were Tere, Martha, or Irene to discuss business later, they might rightly conclude that I was someone who, while well intentioned, was easily distracted from the big picture. I

do not automatically keep in mind the status of my team, because I'm lost in thought. And if, in so formal and explicit a set of rules as apply to the game of golf, I cannot be relied upon to be vigilant, then maybe I'm not going to make a good accountant for the firm.

2. THESE ARE THINGS YOU WON'T KNOW ABOUT YOUR COLLEAGUE OR YOUR CEO, UNLESS YOU PLAY GOLF WITH HIM OR HER.

How does she act on the first tee? Does she establish the rules comfortably for all right away, by declaring a mulligan (allowing an extra shot)? Or does she tee off first, hitting a fabulous drive, and offer the mulligan later, when her subordinate has duffed (screwed up) her first shot?

I met an employment consultant through the Executive Women's Golf Association (EWG) who once invited me and another woman, a law-firm office manager, for a six A.M. tee time. While our threesome played the course's first par five, the consultant picked up my ball, which was a couple of feet off the fairway, and tossed it to me, jocularly and condescendingly telling me to play from where her second shot had landed. I realized at that point that she'd invited me to play because I wasn't quite as good a player as she was, and by bossing me around that way she could be "in charge" of the round, which she had set up. The office manager, whom she wanted to impress, was at about my skill level, but the consultant never picked up her ball out of a bad lie. She praised the office manager's play constantly, attributing it to the influence of the golf pro she had recommended to the woman.

I was the stooge in a business gambit! I was somewhat impressed.

Golf is not that different from animal mating rituals. Bucks clash horns, and not because it will get a doe pregnant. The goal is to determine biomoral supremacy. Conversely, if your social skills are high, you will attract mates. So goes golf. If you're gracious and generous with your golf, you will attract clients and partnerships.

The EWG, with 90 chapters across the country and a membership of some 13,000 golfers, makes a point of reaching out to beginners. Nancy Oliver, EWG's founder, envisioned the club as a supportive environment where women could learn the rules and etiquette of the game without feeling intimidated or pressured. The club is so supportive and nurturing, in fact, that many of the women I met there don't play with anyone except EWG members. Which is not a bad thing; I heard plenty of tales of deals cut on the fairways.

The EWG encourages its members to obtain handicaps—the formal process by which scorecards are submitted and one's average score is calculated. The handicap—the number of strokes a player averages over par—is what allows individuals of different levels to play against each other competitively. This is why you can have a friendly outing with your local Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) pro and win the round. It's also why, unlike, say, tennis, you can play against men who are twice your size.

"I'll put together a foursome," said Tere Throenle, the 37-year-old CFO of SeaWest Financial, "and we can go chase the little white pill around."

3. FORTUNATELY, TESTOSTERONE HAS LITTLE TO DO WITH GOLF, WHICH IS A GAME OF NERVES, MANNERS, AND STRATEGY.

Women taking up golf for the first time usually assume, incorrectly, that men have some kind of advantage due to size or upper-body strength. LPGA pro Jane Horn even argues that women are naturally better equipped for the game. "Due to the physical makeup of the average woman, women have a greater ability for golf than men," she writes in *Golf Is a Woman's Game*.

"Women have an innate sense of generating power that is conducive to the golf swing."

This is how it works: A novice with a 17-inch neck can step onto a driving range, and within half an hour he's hitting the ball 200 yards or more. The ball may very well be going in the wrong direction, but it will be going far, and it's this mindless power-driving that gives men the confidence to go out on the course before they're ready and bluster through a game with bravado and swagger.

Women beginners don't hit the ball very far, says Horn, but they tend to hit a better shot. Women use their whole body in the golf swing, and as a result they get more bang for their relative lack of brawn: "Most male golf pros turn up their noses at an elderly woman hitting a drive 150 yards," Horn adds, "...when the reality of the situation is that if you took her physical strength into consideration, she smacks the daylight out of the ball."

Size doesn't matter in the long run, as 60 percent of success in golf is in the short game, anyway—chipping and putting, things that require concentration, feel, and finesse, not muscle. Or as Doris LaCour says, "You drive for show, putt for dough."

Doris, 56, and a golfer of ten years, is a Los Angeles County deputy sheriff who works in the office of Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, the county supervisor. The most striking thing about her as she approaches the third tee at the Woodland Hills Country Club, outside Los Angeles, is not that she is female or black, but that she is wearing a very elegant, turn-of-the-(last)-century hat with brown ribbon trim; she's as much a standout on the course as the late Payne Stewart was on the pro tour with his knickers and argyles.

Few men or women take up golf explicitly for business purposes, but all who do quickly realize, as Doris did, that the more rarefied the greenswards you walk, the headier the company you will eventually meet. "Golf is an expensive sport," she says, "so you meet professional people on the golf course." Part of her round of duties as the liaison with the Department of Protocol for Parks and Recreation happens to include the regular inspection of L.A. County's public golf courses. In addition to this altogether pleasant obligation, her good fortune in knowing the game of golf allowed her to play a round, on occasion, with her boss, the late Sheriff Leroy Baca.

Three years ago, Doris started a group called Tee Divas, with a mostly minority, mostly professional and executive membership that now numbers 72. They play once a month, hold clinics, and take trips to resorts in places like Jamaica. "My goal is to get as many women involved in the game of golf as possible so they can better themselves in the executive world," she says. Still, not all Tee Divas are women. That would be discriminatory.

Doris didn't take up golf for business but because she was so competitive. "Golf and waterskiing were the only sports I hadn't tried, so I went with a girlfriend and took lessons," she says. She soon recognized the game's social merits. She takes her golf lessons at the Riviera Country Club because it's a good place to rub shoulders and collect business cards. "The driving range," she adds, "is where I get the items for silent auctions for my charity work."

Suddenly I picture the young, ambitious Doris strolling the golf courses of Los Angeles in her fancy hats, much the way Holly Golightly tripped along Fifth Avenue in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, except Doris is trolling for business cards instead of baubles, becoming a mover in county political circles along the way. For a politically minded and driven black woman, taking up the game of golf was a positively brilliant career move.

4. NO ONE ACTUALLY DOES BUSINESS ON THE GOLF COURSE. Talk shop, yes. After our round, over beer and chicken wings, conversation with Tere, Irene, and Martha runs to stock picks. Tere is modest, though it's clear she's made such a killing that her colleagues at work all want her to manage their grandmothers' portfolios. She claims it's luck. Martha, who's been in the computer business 29 years, explains what her company does by sketching out a plan for taking Tere's company onto the

Internet. (Later, when I look up IMRI's Web site, I find a host of press clippings positioning Martha as a Navy veteran, an alumna of IBM and ARCO, and an award-winning businessperson.) I sensed it was appropriate to collect business cards and interview Martha and Irene over the phone only at a later date, rather than mar the day with formal inquiries. And that is how it works: the dance is all about niceties and pleasantries and modulations of all kinds, at the end of which a relationship will just gel at a certain malleable consistency.

"I was waiting to tee off at a sectional tournament, and one of the women in my foursome popped up with 'So, what do you do for a living?'" recalls Lori Baker, an EWG member. "And I was so mad at her I could barely take my shot. That's just not the way it's done. You don't talk about work on the course."

Which is why it's important to join the EWG and learn the etiquette, like waiting until the 19th hole to pass out business cards. There's a lot of etiquette to golf, and this makes it a useful tool for assessing the honesty and circumspection of people you do business with. "Depending on what your profession is, you can use golf to learn a lot about people," says Kathrine Russell, the president of the EWG's Los Angeles chapter. "The way people handle themselves on the course is a direct reflection of who they are. When they start swearing or throwing clubs, or if they cheat, it isn't isolated to that one situation. And this isn't something you're going to see having dinner. If that's in someone's nature, it will come out sometime during 18 holes."

Of course, you can also use the sport's tendency toward character revelation to advantage. Irene Kinoshita tells a story from ten years ago, when her company was new: "We were having some problems with a couple of creditors, and I said, well, let's set up a couple of rounds of golf with these people and try to build up this relationship." Her CFO was skeptical, but Irene insisted. "I said, 'No, they have to understand that we're a good firm and we're going to make it work.' It turned the relationships around 100 percent," she says. Convinced that Ascolta was not a bad pony, the creditors eased up; soon enough, the firm began to flourish. As Irene points out, "It's hard to do that on the phone."

So, if golf is such an all-powerful business tool that it can be used to beat back creditors, why don't more women play? Cindy L. Davis, the president and CEO of Arnold Palmer Golf, sums it up: "It's interesting for a high-level woman executive who has so much power and competency in her role to suddenly be out on the golf course and perhaps not feel that way. I think that has been discouraging to some women."

Irene thinks it's particularly hard for competitive female executives to lighten up. "Women," she says, "think work is something that is supposed to be hard. You should get in early, leave late, and be tired at the end of the day."

This suddenly became clear to me at the EWG party

in December, which consisted of a round of golf on a nine-hole course, followed by a buffet and some miscellaneous award- and gift-giving, mostly to board members, volunteers, and committee chairwomen who had all "worked very hard" in various capacities on numerous EWG events. The emphasis on how "hard" each woman had worked was so relentless that I remember laughing to myself at the time and thinking, with bemusement, Holy cow, what did they do, dig ditches and lay bricks? Now, I'm not saying everybody loafed around and ate donuts, but it seems to me that the female urge to call everything "hard work" is perhaps a bit extreme.

Some of the women I met agreed with me. As Martha says, "To have fun and work simultaneously, to go golfing three times a week and do business—men don't have a problem with that at all. Never crosses their minds. But a lot of women won't do it."

And when they do, they feel the need to cloak their activity in the language of bricklayers. Yet men have known for years that business is a sport. It's a metaphor, of course, but a better metaphor for high-level endeavor than any of the "work" templates women commonly bring to the conference table. Women tend to think of even the most heartfelt forms of work as labor, because for women the rewards of work have traditionally been the incremental rewards of successful husbandry.

Why not adopt the pleasures of power along with its responsibilities?

5. BECAUSE THEY DON'T WANT TO LET YOU IN THE CLUB, THAT'S WHY. Private golf clubs routinely deny women membership, exclude them from the men's dining rooms and bars, and bar them from the golf course itself at certain peak times. This still goes on at exclusive, hallowed courses all over the country, particularly where populations are dense and land values high, as Marcia Chambers relates in her book *The Unplayable Lie*. New York's Westchester Country Club (home of the Buick Classic) is being sued for alleged sexual discrimination by one of its female members. And the Haverhill Golf and Country Club in the Boston area has recently been put under court supervision for its discrimination against women.

Let's just say for argument's sake that it is as important to play golf as it is to have an MBA from Stanford. What does it mean, then, that the traditional venues for golf don't allow women to participate? Well, it would be just as bad as if Stanford let women sit for certain exams but denied them access to classrooms and cafeterias and refused to grant them degrees. Is it a fair argument that Stanford is a private college, and thus can do what it likes? Of course not. And it shouldn't be a fair argument for golf clubs, either.

But there's another and, I believe, even more likely scenario for the death of the discriminatory private golf club. According to the National Golf Foundation, nearly 500 golf courses opened or expanded in 1999, between 80 percent and 85 percent of which are considered

I picture
the young,
ambitious
Doris LaCour
strolling the
golf courses
of L.A. in
her fancy
hats, much
the way Holly
Golightly
tripped
along Fifth
Avenue.

public access. Not nearly enough of these are low-end courses for families and other shlubs with clubs; most of the new golf courses, and most of those now being planned, are either high-priced public courses suitable for business entertaining, or resort courses—prestigious, luxurious venues that cater to vacationers and businesspeople alike.

By the year 2005, according to the National Golf Foundation's estimate, there will be more tee times than golfers to fill them, and most of these courses will be high-end. This means that for the first time in the history of this upper-crust sport the customer will have buying power, whatever his or her gender, skill level, or color of skin. Suddenly the golfers will be doing the discriminating. In 20 years or so, the cruel, snotty private golf club will be about as vital as, say, an exclusive club for the drivers of automobiles.

It may really be that the issue is being resolved by the marketplace. After all, Pebble Beach, one of the most hallowed sites in all of golf, is a public course, technically. A deluxe public course: At \$300 per round, which doesn't include caddies or tips—or the \$400 hotel room that gets you a tee time—you're looking at something like \$1,000 for a day of golf. But unlike the country club of yore, this mecca is a meritocracy, where any business-minded Becky Sharp who can leverage the funds is free to seek her fortune on the greens.

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