

Wisdom, Golf, and Obama

On his August 14, 2009 weekly show *Real Time*, comedian Bill Maher poked fun at President Obama's new-found enthusiasm for golf, and suggested he should stick to basketball. A few days earlier, the *New York Times* ran a story entitled "Chávez Loyalists Push to Close Golf Courses," which mentioned the hostility Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez felt toward golf. "'Golf is a bourgeois sport,' he said, repeating the word 'bourgeois' as if he were swallowing castor oil. Then he went on, mocking the use of golf carts as a practice illustrating the sport's laziness." At the end of the month President Obama demonstrated, as he often had before, that he valued both golf and wisdom. In mid-August, ABC News reported that Obama had played golf a dozen times since becoming president and quoted him as saying, "It is the only time that, for six hours, first of all, that I'm outside. And second of all, where you almost feel normal, in the sense that you're not in a bubble." Obama's valuing of wisdom was clearly revealed in his presidential campaign and often reiterated after he became president.¹ While he and his family vacationed at Martha's Vineyard at the end of August, he also reappointed Ben Bernanke as chairman of the Federal Reserve, and in brief remarks lauded Bernanke, saying "'Ben approached a financial system on the verge of collapse with calm and wisdom.'" Right after these remarks, Obama headed for a local golf course. Less than 24 hours later, he received news of Senator Ted Kennedy's death, and issued a statement praising the senator's wisdom: "I valued his wise counsel in the Senate . . . I've profited as President from his encouragement and wisdom."

So, who is right? Is playing golf somehow unwise, as Maher and Chávez suggest? Or are golf and wisdom compatible as Obama's words and actions imply? Maher mentioned that golf courses use a great deal of water and are often bad for the environment. Chávez and some of his supporters have argued that the acres taken up by some golf courses could be better used for such purposes as low income housing and parks for children. And indeed such objections need to be seriously considered. But Obama's viewpoint perhaps was closer to that of Thomas Friedman, an author of one of the books (*Hot, Flat and Crowded*) that Obama took on vacation with him. About a month earlier Friedman, both a golf enthusiast and man who cares about the environment and world poverty, had written an op-ed about 59-year-old golfer Tom Watson's dramatic performance in the British Open, where he came within a few shots of winning. Friedman wrote that "when a man our own age and size whips the world's best — who are half his age — we identify. . . . He's my age; he's my build; he's my height; and he even had his hip replaced like me. If he can do that, maybe I can do something like that, too." Friedman went on to write that "golf is the sport most like life. . . . Baseball, basketball and football are played on flat surfaces designed to give true bounces. Golf is played on an uneven terrain designed to surprise. Good and bad bounces are built into the essence of the game. And the reason golf is so much like life is that the game — like life — is all about how you react to those good and bad

¹ For the ABC story, see <http://abcnews.go.com/m/screen?id=8224289&pid=77>, and for Obama's attitude toward wisdom during the presidential campaign, see my essay "Obama, McCain, Bush, Age, Experience, and Wisdom," at <http://hnn.us/articles/52853.html>.

bounces. . . . Golf is all about individual character. The ball is fixed. No one throws it to you. You initiate the swing, and you alone have to live with the results. There are no teammates to blame or commiserate with. . . . This wonderful but cruel game never stops testing or teaching you."²

In our sports-crazed society, where sports' pages might take up one-fourth of some popular daily newspapers and politicians often use sports' metaphors, I tend to be suspicious of statements such as "Golf is all about individual character." Too many good golfers, as well as those who excel at other sports, do not display much good character. Yet, like Friedman implies, **approached in the right way**, playing golf can help make us recreational golfers wiser.

How so? Below is a list of items helpful to remember if we wish to accomplish that goal.

- Golf is a GAME, a leisure activity. Enough has been written about sports, leisure, and play for us to realize that they should not be undervalued.³ But they must be kept in perspective. Golf is primarily a chance to get away from our more serious work and obligations, a chance to "recharge our batteries."
- Wisdom involves "balancing various self-interests (intrapersonal) with the interests of others (interpersonal) and of other aspects of the context in which one lives (extrapersonal)."⁴ Wise balancing might mean, for example, that a parent with young children might spend more time with them on a weekend than on the golf course. Good balancing also means making appropriate decisions in regard to what we spend on golf, not only in terms of time, but also in regard to money. Buying that \$300.00 club that helps us hit the ball longer and straighter might not be a wise decision if our families are hurting for money.
- Golf, like most sports, is paradoxical. On the one hand, the object is to shoot the lowest score possible and if playing in competition, say with friends, to win. For many weekend golfers the competition can be a good part of the fun. On the other hand, as Friedman suggested, what is most important is not what you shoot but, "how you react to those good and bad bounces," how you conduct yourself.
- As we put on our golf shoes, we should leave our egos behind along with our street shoes. *Too* much concern with self and "winning" is not only bad in life, it is bad for our golf. A round of golf is an opportunity to take a break from the workaday world, to enjoy companionship with friends, to get some exercise (especially if we walk the course), and to enjoy trees and lakes—although, like the sand in sand traps as compared to that at the beach, they can often impede progress towards the hole. Too much concern for score and winning can detract not only from these enjoyments but also from the quality of a round. It can lead to trying too hard, which is more harmful in golf than in most sports.
- Golf can help us develop humility, an important trait possessed by wise people. American Psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, who wrote many popular self-help books, once wrote "I play golf precisely because it is humiliating. While I don't enjoy being

² "59 Is the New 30," at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/29/opinion/29friedman.html>.

³ See, e.g., Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens; A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); Sebastian de Grazia, *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* (New York: Anchor Books, 1964); Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports: End Zones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); M. Andrew Holowchak, ed. *Philosophy of Sport: Critical Readings, Crucial Issues* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002).

⁴ Robert J. Sternberg, *Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity Synthesized* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 152.

humiliated, I do need it.” He also mentioned the experience of feeling “so humiliated that you would rather bury yourself deep in the nearest sand trap than ever show your face on a golf course again.” Peck admitted to having a personality which was not ideal for golf—he tended to get angry when things (like golf balls) did not go his way. Although President Obama does not seem to have the anger problem that Peck spoke of, he has expressed his frustration with the game. “It’s a game that I keep on thinking I should be good at, and somehow the ball goes this way and that way and never goes straight.”⁵ It seems appropriate that golf spelled backward is “flog.”

- Among other traits that wise people need are patience, perseverance, self-discipline, and a sense of humor, all qualities that golf can help us develop. Unlike sports like basketball and tennis, there is little reward for hustle in golf. On the contrary, hurrying or being hard-charging, is almost always detrimental to one’s score. Patience, combined with a relaxed perseverance, is much more helpful. In regard to self-discipline, you often have to remind yourself to keep your head down or elbows in; and when your ball hits a tree and goes out of bounds rather than back on the fairway, a patient smile or laugh is much better for your game than an angry tirade. Jack Nicklaus once observed that accepting a certain amount of fatalism in golf is necessary to improve one’s game.⁶
- The wisdom of Eastern religions and philosophies—and of some Western poets—seems especially appropriate for golf. In recent years, increasing numbers of professional golfers have turned to “mind coaches” for help with their games—Stewart Cink, who defeated Tom Watson in the recent British Open, thanked his *two* mind coaches. Such coaches often advise virtues preached by Eastern wisdom. Joseph Parent’s *Zen Golf* is typical of this approach, and it has sold more than a quarter of a million copies worldwide.⁷ Taoism’s “go-with-the-flow” (be at one with the Tao) philosophy and its sayings such as “the absence of desires bring tranquility” also seem appropriate to help avoid the over-concern with score and winning that has plagued many a golfer. Mind coaches tend to use words like calmness, focus, patience, tempo, and expressions like “playing in the moment.” Among the writings of Western poets, lines like Yeats’s “Wisdom is a butterfly / And not a gloomy bird of prey,” and Wordsworth’s “O evil day! If I were sullen / While Earth herself is adorning / This sweet May-morning” are useful to remember when golf threatens to do what someone (Mark Twain, G. B. Shaw?) once said it did—spoil a good time (“Golf is a good walk spoiled”). Or when we wish to blame others or bad luck, or poor conditions or anyone or thing for a poor shot, Shakespeare’s “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves” can remind us where the real fault probably lies.⁸
- Wisdom is also about beauty and achieving some transcendent moments in life, and what keeps many golfers coming back to the game are those rare moments when they hit shots that seem almost perfect. Sure Tiger Woods could hit the ball longer, but many an

⁵ M. Scott Peck, *Golf and the Spirit: Lessons for the Journey*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), 4-5; <http://abcnews.go.com/m/screen?id=8224289&pid=77>

⁶ For a list of wisdom traits, see Copthorne Macdonald’s “Values that Various People Have Associated with Wisdom,” <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html>; in a recent essay, “The Wisdom of Andrei Sakharov,” <http://www.wisdompage.com/SakharovEssay.pdf>, 30-31, 69, I have emphasized that persistence was an important part of Sakharov’s wisdom.

⁷ See <http://www.zengolf.com/about.php> for more about the book and its author.

⁸ Another poet, known more for his prose, and himself an avid golfer, has written some fine essays and fiction on golf. See John Updike, *Golf Dreams* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997).

amateur has made a long putt or holed a ball from off the green. Some have even had a hole-in-one, and even Woods can't ask for a better result than that. A ball that flies over a lake, hits the green, and rolls in the hole can heighten our appreciation of Keats's line "A thing of beauty is a joy forever."

Of course, golf doesn't do much to develop some of the other attributes needed for wisdom such as compassion and tolerance. And although wisdom is primarily about making good judgments, the good judgments needed to be made on a golf course—like whether to lay up or try to go over a lake from a long way off—are not of earth-shaking importance. It is, after all, just a game, just a diversion from the more serious concerns of life. Nevertheless, for a president who values wisdom, and for a country that needs a wise president, I would differ from Bill Maher and approve of President Obama taking to the links occasionally.