

Chapter 1

Why Play Golf?

In This Chapter

- ▶ Uncovering golf's history
 - ▶ Answering the question “What makes golf special?”
 - ▶ Looking at a standard golf course
 - ▶ Understanding the benefits of smart play
 - ▶ Taking steps toward being a “real” golfer
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Golf is simple. You've got clubs and a ball. You have to hit the ball into a series of holes laid out in the middle of a large, grassy field. After you finish the 18th hole, you may want to go to the clubhouse bar and tell lies about your on-course feats to anyone you didn't play with that day. But if you're like most golfers, you play the game for much more than the chance to impress gullible strangers. You play for relaxation, companionship, and a chance to enjoy the great outdoors. Of course, you also encounter some hazards out there. This game is anything but straightforward.

How It All Began: Discovering Golf's Origins

Golf dates back to medieval Scotland, on the gloomy, misty east coast of the kingdom of Fife, where Macbeth ruled in the 11th century. Some historians say golf began when Scottish shepherds used their long, wooden crooks to knock rocks at rabbit holes. Their hobby became so habit-forming that the Scots of later centuries played “gowf” instead of practicing their archery.

The first printed reference to golf came in 1457, when Scotland's King James II banned “gowf” so that his subjects could concentrate on their archery — the better to beat the hated English on the battlefield. Golf was outlawed until 1501. After that, James's descendants, including his great-great-granddaughter Mary, Queen of Scots, embraced the game. (The original golf widow, she scandalized Britain by playing golf in the days after her husband, Lord Darnley, was murdered.)

The wooden golf balls of Queen Mary's day gave way to *featheries* — leather pouches stuffed with goose feathers — and then *guttie balls* made from gutta-percha rubber imported to Scotland from Malaysia in the 1850s. In 1860 one of the best Scottish golfers, Tom Morris of St. Andrews, helped organize the first Open Championship, the tournament that launched modern professional golf. Scottish pros immigrated to the United States, introduced Americans to the game, and the rest is history. And frustration. And fun.

Examining Why Golf Is Unique

You've probably heard that business leaders are constantly making huge deals on the course, advancing their careers. Well, "constantly" may be an overstatement — business leaders, like other players, spend much of their time on the course looking for wayward golf balls. But it's true that golf can help you climb the corporate ladder. That's one reason to play.

And it's about the 167th most-important reason. More-important reasons include spending time with friends, staying in shape, and enjoying some of the most beautiful scenery you'll ever see. (All tennis courts are pretty much the same, but each golf course is different from every other, and many are designed to show off their gorgeous settings.) Golf is a physical *and* mental challenge — it tests your skill and your will.

It's also a game for a lifetime. Your friends may play football and basketball in high school, but how many are still returning kickoffs or grabbing rebounds when they're 30, 40, or 60 years old?

The most important reason to play, though, is that golf is magic. It's maddening, frustrating, crazy — and totally addictive. After it becomes part of your life, you can barely imagine life without it.

Golf is also famously difficult. If it were easy, everyone would play the game. As I see it, two main factors are responsible for that:

- ✔ The ball doesn't move on its own.
- ✔ You have, on average, about three minutes between shots.

In other words, you don't react to the ball as you do in most sports. A baseball gets thrown, hit, and spat on. A football gets passed, tossed, kicked, and run up and down the field. A basketball gets shot, rebounded, and dribbled all over the place. But a golf ball just sits there, daring you not to lose it.

In most sports, you have only an instant to react to the action — your natural athleticism takes over, and you move to the ball. In golf, you get far too long to think about what you're doing. Thinking too much can strangle the soul and warp the mind.

Maybe golf would be easier if the ball moved and you were on skates. Then you could stop worrying and *react*. But if it were easy it wouldn't be golf, would it?

Breaking Down a Typical Course

Most golf courses have 18 holes, although a few, usually because of a lack of money or land, have only 9. The *19th hole* is golfspeak for the clubhouse bar — the place where you can reflect on your game over a refreshing beverage of your choice. (See Appendix A for the lowdown on golf jargon.) Courses beside the sea are called *links*, in honor of the parts of Scotland where the game began. (They were the link between beach and farmland.) Many people use “links” to mean any golf course, but we purists stick to the correct usage: A links is a course by the water.

Most golf courses are between 5,500 and 7,000 yards. A few monsters are longer, but leave those courses to the pros you see on TV. Start at the low end of that scale and work your way up.

Every hole is a par-3, a par-4, or a par-5. (Par-2s are for minigolf courses; the exceedingly rare par-6s tend to be gimmicks.) *Par* is the number of strokes a competent golfer should take to play a particular hole. For example, on a par-5 hole, a regulation par may consist of a drive, two more full swings, and two putts. Two putts is the standard on every green.



Three putts are too many. One putt is a bonus. The bottom line is that in a perfect round of par golf, half the allocated strokes should be taken on the greens. That premise makes putting crucial. (I talk about how to putt in Chapter 9.)

Obviously, a par-5 is longer than a par-4 (two full swings, two putts), which in turn is longer than a par-3 (one full swing, two putts). With rare exceptions, par-3s are from 100 to 250 yards in length; par-4s are from 251 to 470 yards long, barring severe topography; and par-5s are from 471 to 690 yards.

Many courses in the United States have a total par of 72, consisting of ten par-4s (40), four par-3s (12), and four par-5s (20). But you can find golf courses with total pars of anywhere from 62 to 74. Almost anything goes. Table 1-1 lists the yardages that determine par on a hole, for men and women. It's worth noting that these guidelines don't always refer to precise yardages, but rather to what the United States Golf Association (USGA) calls a hole's “effective playing length.” A 460-yard hole that goes straight uphill, for example, may be a par-5 for men.

Table 1-1 Regulation Yardages		
	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>
Par-3	210 yards or less	250 yards or less
Par-4	211 to 400 yards	251 to 470 yards
Par-5	401 to 575 yards	471 to 690 yards
Par-6	More than 575 yards	More than 690 yards

Source: United States Golf Association

That's the big picture. You often find several different teeing areas on each hole so that you can play the hole from different lengths based on your level of skill. The vast majority of holes have more than one teeing area — usually four. I've seen courses with as many as six different tees on one hole. Deciding which tee area to use can make you silly. So the tee areas are marked with color-coded tees that indicate ability to help you out:

- ✓ The **gold tees** are invariably the back tees and are for long-ball strikers or lower handicap players only.
- ✓ The **blue tees** are usually slightly ahead of the gold and make the holes shorter, but still plenty hard. Club competitions are played from these tees.
- ✓ The **white tees** are for everyday, casual play and are the right choice for most men, beginning golfers, and capable senior players. Stray from the white tees at your peril.
- ✓ The **red tees** are traditionally used by women or junior golfers, although many women I play with use the same tees I play.

Playing a Smart Game

Simply stated, the goal of golf is to get the ball into each of 18 holes in succession with the fewest number of shots, using no more than 14 clubs. After you hit the ball into all the holes, you add up your scores from each hole. The lower your total score, the better. That's it.

The game's charm lies in the journey. As you play, you find countless ways to get the ball into the hole in as few strokes as possible. Many outside stimuli — and many more inside your head — make golf one of the most interesting, maddening, thrilling, and just plain *fun* endeavors you'll ever find.



The best advice I can give you is to relax. Stay calm, make prudent decisions, and never hit a shot while contemplating other matters. You should play golf with complete concentration and no ego. The game tempts you to try feats of

derring-do. To play your best, you must judge your talents and abilities honestly. You alone determine your success or failure: Should you try to make it over the water and go for the green that's 240 yards away? Or play it safe?

Don't get greedy — play the game one step at a time. Figure 1-1 shows a smart course of action. You start at the tee and hit your drive to Point A. From there, it's 240 yards to the green, with a watery grave lurking to the left. So you lay up to Point B, and go from there to the green via C. This approach doesn't always work — you may *aim* for Point B and still yank your second shot into the pond — but it's the smart play. And that's the key to good golf.

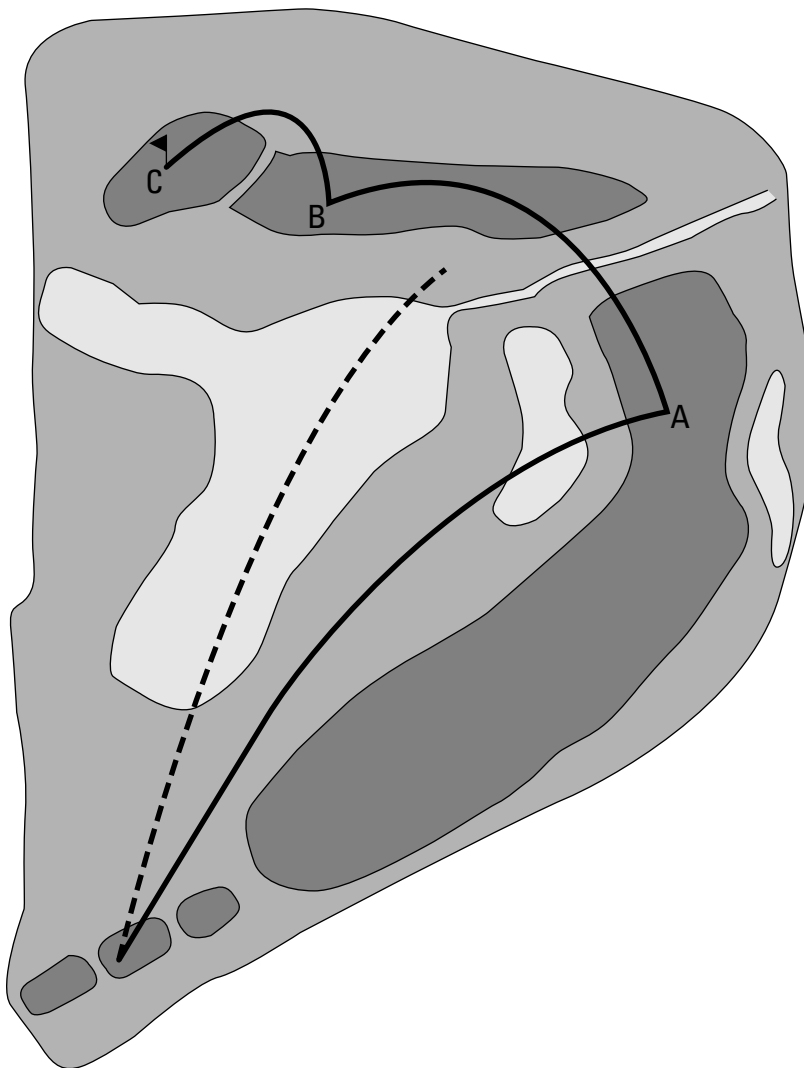


Figure 1-1:
A reasonable plan
for playing a
golf hole.

Score is everything. As you see in Chapters 8, 9, and 10, the most pivotal shots occur within 100 yards of the hole. If you can save strokes there, your score will be lower than that of the player whose sole purpose in life is to crush the ball as far as possible. So practice your putting, sand play, chips, and pitches twice as much as your driving. Your hard work will pay off, and your friends will be the ones dipping into their wallets (assuming you're wagering, as I discuss in Chapter 15).

Becoming a "Real" Golfer

What's a "real" golfer? The three essential characteristics are

- ✓ You understand the game.
- ✓ You can play it a little.
- ✓ You never dishonor its spirit.

Anyone can smack a ball aimlessly around a course. (I can already hear my fellow professionals saying, "Yeah — like you, McCord!") But that doesn't make you a real golfer. There's much more to this game than hitting a ball with a stick.

How can you start becoming a real golfer? It's easy: Read this book. You find everything you need to get started, from equipment to instruction to common problems, etiquette, betting, and more. I tell you about the pitfalls that beginners face (and I'm not just talking bunkers), and how to avoid them.

You need to start by buying golf clubs and balls. You don't have to shell out thousands of dollars to get started. You can start simple — use cheap equipment at first, and spend more if you enjoy the game. (Check out Chapter 2 for tips on what you need to get started.)

After you have golf clubs, you need to know how to grip the club: The V between the thumb and forefinger of your top hand should point to your right shoulder (for righties; reverse it if you're left-handed), and the golf club is more in your fingers and not so much in the palm of your hand. That seems simple, but you wouldn't believe how many beginners get it wrong — and complicate their voyage to the promised land of "real" golfers. (Chapter 6 has more information on this gripping — pardon the pun — topic.)

When you've got the grip down pat, along with the setup, you're ready to swing. Believe me, the swing isn't as easy as it looks. That's why I devote an entire chapter — Chapter 7 — to developing your own swing.

Knowing when to hit (and when *not* to), how to keep score, proper etiquette, and how to bet are integral parts of the game. You've probably heard about golf etiquette, handicaps, and one- and two-stroke penalties — and maybe even such goofy-sounding concepts as nassaus, skins, and barkies. If not, don't worry. The chapters in Part III give you the lowdown on these and other important topics.

Living the Golf Life

As any true golf nut can tell you, there's more to the game than playing it. You also have the fun of feeding your addiction by watching the sport in person or on TV, following it on the Internet, and playing virtual golf when the snow piles up outside. (See Part V for my guide to those off-the-course outlets.)

If the golf bug bites you, as it has bitten millions of others, that little sucker will have you living and breathing birdies, bogeys, barkies, and digital dimples — all the stuff that keeps golf nuts going when they're not actually out on the course, slapping balls who knows where.

Fun facts from golf history

- ✓ Dutch historians, including Steven von Hengel, have argued that golf originated in Holland around 1297. A form of the game called *spel metten kolve* (and also *colf*, which means "club") was popular in the late 13th century. *Colf* is believed to have been played mostly on ice.
- ✓ The first instruction book, written by Thomas Kincaid, appeared in 1687. Among his surprisingly sensible tips: "Maintain the same posture of the body throughout (the swing) . . . and the ball must be straight before your breast, a little towards the left foot." How did he know?
- ✓ In 1743, a shipment of 96 golf clubs and 432 golf balls made its way from Scotland to Charleston, South Carolina. Such a big order suggests it was intended for a group of golfers. Another golf club or society may have been organized in Savannah, Georgia, in 1796, only to be disbanded later. It would be another century before American golf got going for good.
- ✓ The first major tournament, the Open Championship, was held with only eight players at Prestwick Golf Club on the west coast of Scotland in 1860. Old Tom Morris finished second to Willie Park, whose prize was a year's custody of the Championship Belt and a purse of £0. That's right — zero pounds. In those days the honor of victory was supposed to be prize enough.
- ✓ America's first permanent golf club was formed in 1888 in Yonkers, New York. The St. Andrews Golf Club played on a three-hole layout that ended near a large apple tree. The club's golfers became known as the Apple Tree Gang. They hung their coats

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on the tree before they teed off. According to legend, they finished play one day to find their coats stolen by a rival gang known for its disdain of fruit.

- ✓ In 1890, the term *bogey* was coined by Hugh Rotherham — only back then it referred to playing a hole in the perfect number of strokes, or a *ground score*, which we today call *par*. Shortly after the invention of the Haskell ball, which made reaching a hole in fewer strokes possible, bogey came to represent a score of one over par for a hole.
 - ✓ The term *birdie* wasn't coined until 1898, emanating from Atlantic Country Club out of the phrase "a bird of a hole." This gap in terminology is no doubt attributed to the difficulty in attaining a bird, a fact that endures to this day.
 - ✓ A match-play exhibition was held in 1926, pitting Professional Golfers Association members from Britain and America. Played in England, the home team dominated 13½ to 1½. The next year, at Worcester Country Club, the teams met again, only this time possession of a solid gold trophy donated by a wealthy British seed merchant named Samuel A. Ryder was at stake. Thus were born the Ryder Cup Matches.
 - ✓ The Hershey Chocolate Company, in sponsoring the 1933 Hershey Open, became the first corporate title sponsor of a professional tournament. So blame the cocoa guys.
 - ✓ A local telecast of the 1947 U.S. Open in St. Louis marked the advent of televised golf, a red-letter day in golf history if ever there was one. Now I could finally have a job.
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