

Chapter 1

What Is This Thing Called Golf?

In This Chapter

- ▶ Knowing the goals of the game
 - ▶ Answering the question: Why play golf?
 - ▶ Looking at a typical course
 - ▶ Becoming a “real” golfer
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Golf is a simple game. 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 reach the 18th hole, you may want to go to a bar and tell lies about your on-course feats to anyone you didn’t play with that day. If you’re like most people, you play golf for relaxation and a chance to see the great outdoors. If you’re like Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, Greg Norman, and Tiger Woods, you make a bazillion dollars on top of seeing the great outdoors.

Of course, there are some obstacles. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, who called golf “a silly game played with implements ill-suited for the purpose,” the game isn’t always straightforward.

The Goals of the 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 14 clubs. After you hit the ball into all the holes, you add up your scores from all the holes. The lower your total score, the better. That is golf. That is the goal.

The game lies in the journey. As you play, you devise ways to get the ball into the hole in as few strokes as possible. Many outside stimuli — and many more inside you — make this endeavor very interesting.



The best advice I can give you is to take the game slowly, make prudent decisions, and never hit a shot while contemplating other matters. Golf should be played with total concentration and a complete disregard for your ego. Try a monastic existence, at least for the duration of the round. Golf tempts you to try feats of derring-do. You must judge your talents and abilities. 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?

Figure 1-1 shows how to plan your course of action. You start at the tee and move to Position A. If the ball goes 240 yards and a watery grave is lurking to the left, don't try the improbable and go for it. Lay up to Position B, and go from there to the green via C. Take the talents that you have and explore this ever-fascinating game of maneuvering a ball through the hazards of your mind. Welcome to my nightmare.

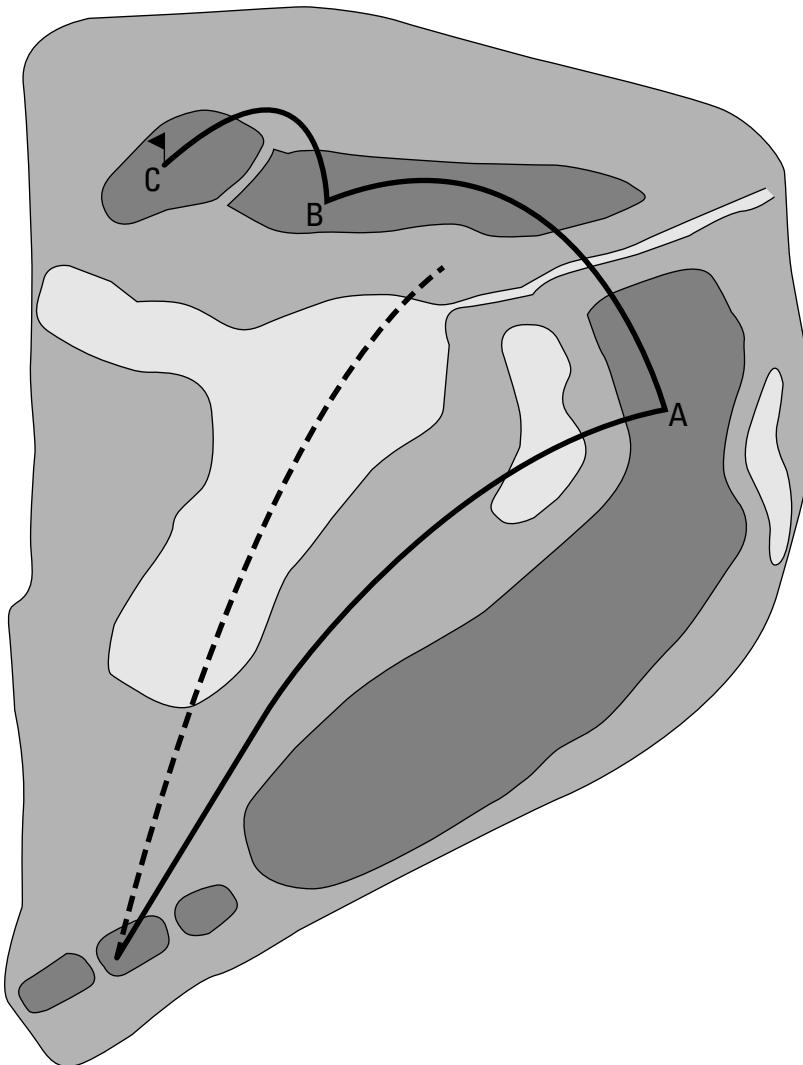


Figure 1-1:

Don't get too ambitious — play the game one step at a time.

Why it's the hardest game of all

As I see it, golf is the world's hardest game for two reasons:

- ✓ 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 is thrown, hit, and spit on. A football is passed, tossed, kicked, and run up and down the field. A basketball is shot, rebounded, and dribbled all over the place.

A golf ball just sits there and defies you not to lose it.

In most sports, you have but an instant to react to the action. Your natural athleticism takes over, and you play to the whim of the ball. In golf, you get to think about what you're doing for much too long. Thinking too much strangles the soul and suffocates the mind.

Golf would be easier if the ball moved a little and you were on skates.

Score is everything. As you see in Chapters 8, 9, and 10, most scoring occurs within 100 yards of the hole. If you can save strokes here, 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, and short shots twice as much as your driving. Your hard work will pay off, and your friends will be the ones dipping into their wallets.

Why Play Golf?

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 may 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 or 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. When it becomes part of your life, you can barely imagine life without it.

What You'll Find on a Typical Course



Most golf courses have 18 holes, although a few, usually because of a lack of money or land, have only 9. 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.) 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.)

How long is a typical golf course? Most 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 you play will be 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 reasonably competent player should take to play a particular hole. For example, on a par-5 hole, a regulation par might consist of a drive, two more full swings, and two putts. Two putts is the standard on every green.



Three putts isn't good. 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 important. (I talk about how to putt in Chapter 8.)

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 between 251 and 475 yards long, barring severe topography; and par-5s are anything longer than that.

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 to what the United States Golf Association calls a hole's "effective playing length." A 460-yard hole that went straight uphill, for example, could be a par-5 for men.

	Regulation Yardages	
	Women	Men
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. 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:

- ✔ The **gold tees** are invariably the back tees and are for blessed strikers 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 beginning golfers. Stray from the white tees at your peril.
- ✔ The **red tees** are traditionally used by women, although many women I play with use the same tees I play.

How You Can Become a “Real” Golfer

What's a “real” golfer? There are three essentials:

- ✔ 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’ll 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. 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, you’re ready to swing. Believe me, the swing is not as easy as it looks. That’s why I devote an entire chapter — Chapter 7 — to developing your own swing. That’s where you can determine what type of golfer you are. You can also find out about swing plane, various checkpoints during the swing, and what amateurs can glean from the swings of such great players as Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, Annika Sorenstam, and Tiger Woods.

You’ve probably heard about golf etiquette, handicaps, and one- and two-stroke penalties — and maybe even such goofy-sounding things as nassaus, skins, and barkies. If not, don’t worry. You’ll soon be tossing such terms around like a pro. (Chapters 13, 14, and 15 give you the fine points of playing with experienced golfers on public and private courses.) Knowing when to hit (and when *not* to), how to keep score, and how to bet are integral parts of the game.

Living the Golf Life

As any true golf nut will tell you, there’s more to the game than playing it. There’s the fun of feeding your addiction by watching the sport on TV, following it on the Internet, and playing golf video games when there’s a foot of snow outside. (See Chapters 16, 17, and 18 for my guide to televised golf, the game’s best Web sites, and other 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.

Cool historical things to know about golf

- ✔ The first reference to golf dates back to the reign of King James II of Scotland. In 1457, King James decreed that “futeball” and “gowf” were forbidden so that Scottish men could concentrate on their archery practice — the better to beat their enemies, the English, on the battlefield. Golf remained outlawed until 1501.
- ✔ 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 called *colf* (which means *club*), was popular in the late 13th century. *Colf*, it is believed, was played mostly on ice.
- ✔ The first instruction book, written by Thomas Kincaid, appeared in 1687. Among his 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.
- ✔ 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 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 was at stake, donated by a wealthy British seed merchant named Samuel A. Ryder. 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.

