

# does beer help?

**Our well-lubricated  
Golf Digest Dream  
Team goes guzzling  
in the name of  
science: Does beer  
help the average  
player's game  
or hurt it? Well, it  
all depends...**

**By David Owen**

GOLFERS HAVE LONG REFERRED TO alcohol as "swing oil," and for a plausible reason: Golf swings are ruined by tension, and tension is exacerbated by sobriety. Nevertheless, alcohol, if consumed in excessive quantities, can have the opposite effect instead: Over-lubricated players have been known to whiff putts and take divots out of playing partners.

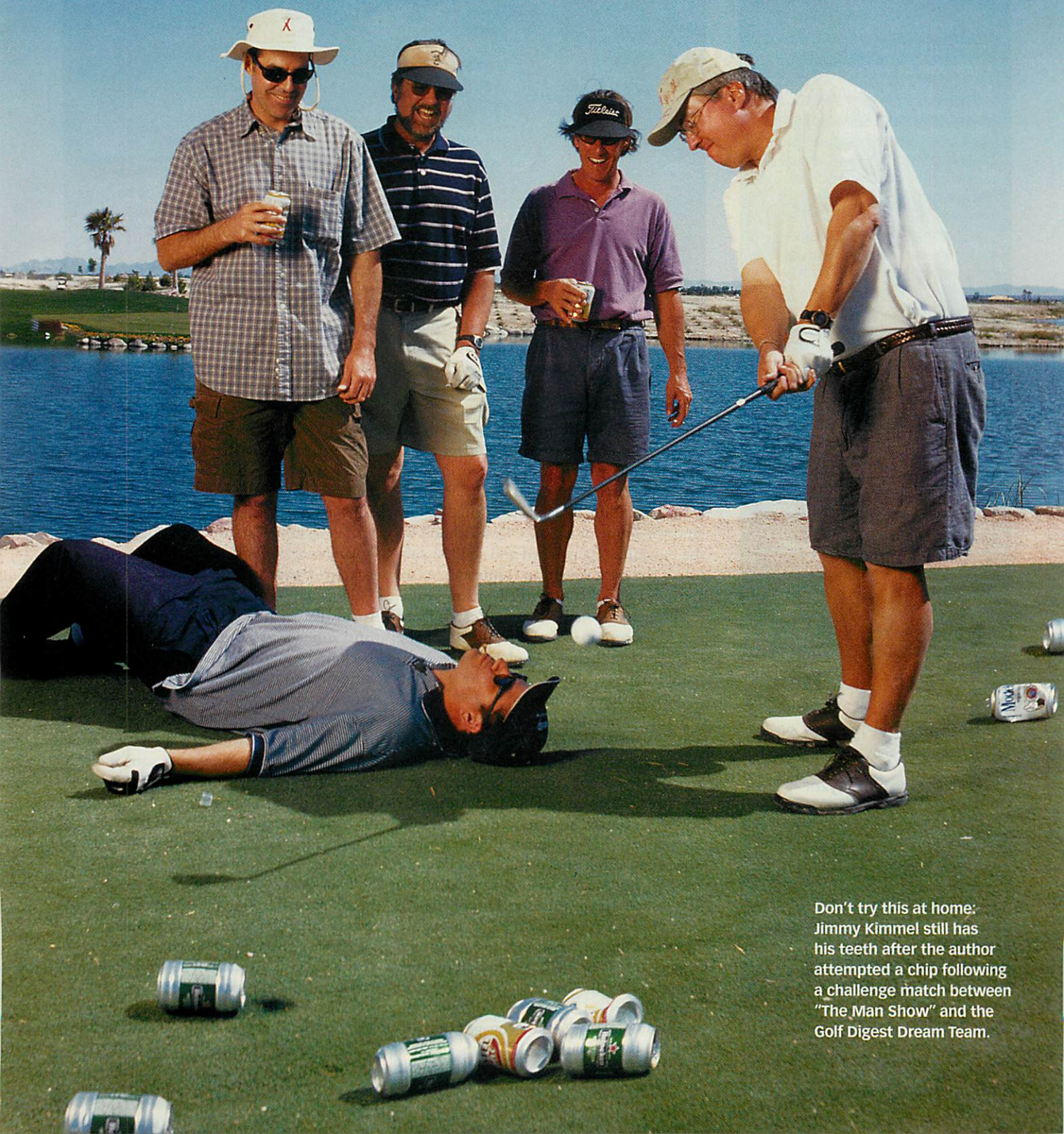
Not long ago, the editors of Golf Digest decided to determine once and for all whether drinking is good or bad for golf. What was needed, they concluded, was a truly scientific study of the effects of alcohol

on the golf swing—a rigorous, double-blind, peer-reviewed assessment conducted in a laboratory setting and supervised by medical personnel.

Instead, they sent me and three of my regular golf buddies to Las Vegas for four days, and gave us unlimited access to golf, casinos and beer. They also recruited a second foursome, consisting of three guys from "The Man Show" and one from MTV. The results of our experiment may surprise you. In fact, given the indistinct nature of most of my Las Vegas recollections, they may surprise me.

(If you already know you want to cancel





Don't try this at home: Jimmy Kimmel still has his teeth after the author attempted a chip following a challenge match between "The Man Show" and the Golf Digest Dream Team.



## What do a couple of beers do to you? Three? Six?

Golf Digest Director of Instruction Scott Smith and Associate Editor Ron Kaspriske were tested for blood-alcohol content (BAC) after each of six 12-ounce beers were consumed:

We can't say it strongly enough: *Do not drink and drive.* We made sure we had designated drivers, and you should, too.

The six beers apiece were consumed in about two hours, on relatively full stomachs, to approximate what might occur during or after a round. After each beer was consumed we took an official reading with a Breathalyzer, a device used by law-enforcement officials (unit courtesy of Breathalyzer.net).

Your results may differ dramatically, so don't use this chart to decide what's safe for you—it's no guarantee. The California Highway Patrol, for instance, cautions that a person weighing less than 150 pounds risks a DUI offense after three beers over two hours, and that anyone, regardless of weight, would be at risk after five beers.

Our results (one 12-ounce beer is the equivalent of six ounces of wine or one ounce of hard alcohol):

BEER	Scott	Ron
	Age: 44 Height: 6-feet-1 Weight: 160	Age: 33 Height: 6-feet-2 Weight: 213
	Breathalyzer	
1	.012	.013
2	.023	.028
3	.049	.042
4	.062	.049
5	.069	.064
6	.083*	.086*

\*Driving with a .08 blood-alcohol level or more is illegal in many states; many states have lowered the level from .10 to .08 because of the number of vehicle crashes involving persons at .08.



The social skills challenge: Hacker flings Cousin Sal's shoes after Golf Digest's victory in the challenge match.

your subscription, you can go to the magazine's website and angrily click the button labeled "I am unbelievably outraged!")

### THE DREAM TEAM

The Golf Digest Dream Team arrived in Las Vegas on a Friday afternoon, after a six-Bloody Mary flight from New York. From the airport, we went directly to the Silverstone Golf Club, a nice new 27-hole facility (and the home of a Golf Digest School) on the outskirts of a parched and soulless suburb of the great American Gomorrah. As we arrived, I gazed thoughtfully at my teammates, whom I had selected as carefully as Lee Marvin prepared the members of the Dirty Dozen: Brendan Foulois, power-company lineman, age 51, handicap 11; Bob Hacker, building contractor, age 58, handicap 13; Jim Paisley, freelance director and writer, age 53, handicap 18. (All names are real.) I am 48, and my handicap is 9. The four of us play golf together frequently on a picturesque nine-hole course near our homes, in northwest Connecticut, and over the years we have conducted quite a bit of what I now think of as preliminary research.

At Silverstone, we headed straight to the first tee for a practice round. Our big match with "The Man Show"/MTV team would take place the next morning, and we wanted to work out a few kinks. We caught up with the beer cart in the second fairway, and made the first of a succession of bulk purchases. While doing so, we engaged in light-

heartedly prurient banter with the cart's attractive young female driver, who, like golf-course beer-cart drivers everywhere, managed to foster the impression that if she weren't so terribly busy selling beer, she would love nothing better than to become romantically involved with a quartet of tubby middle-aged strangers wearing baseball caps and saddle shoes. By the time we finished our round, 3½ hours later, we had gotten to know her pretty well, as a result of having sent her back to the clubhouse twice to restock her cart with Heineken.

How did we play? Quite competently, actually. Paisley had no four-putts on the second nine—a personal best. Hacker, who, back home, once stuck around for post-golf refreshments despite having suffered a heart attack on the final hole, birdied the 17th. I made an eagle. Foulois played like a man half his age. (In seeming defiance of the laws of mathematics, he has two sons in their early 30s.) That's about as specific as I can be about our round, I'm afraid. We consumed a little more than \$200 worth of beer, had no adult supervision and left our scorecards on the carts. Also, I forgot to take notes.

That evening, after showers and brief, involuntary naps, we reconvened in the lobby of our hotel for supplemental research. In recent years, Las Vegas has made a major effort to reposition itself as a place where you can unashamedly entertain not just your ex-con brother-in-law but also your kindergarten-age kids. I worried, therefore, that



finding alcoholic beverages in our hotel might be tough. But it wasn't! Even in the family-friendly casino, cocktails of many descriptions were readily available.

A couple of hours later, one of the blackjack dealers—a dour, dark-haired matron, who was a stickler for a certain house rule concerning when you may touch your chips—gave Hacker a nickname: High Maintenance Bob. And so to bed.

#### FOAMING THE RUNWAY

When we returned to Silverstone the next morning, my playing partners and I discovered that our overindulgence during the previous 24 hours had plunged us into a state of severe sub-sobriety—a condition that can be treated only with extended bed rest or renewed drinking. I assessed my own status at approximately three beers below sober, meaning that I would need to consume half a six-pack just to restore a state of semi-alert nondependency—a very unappealing thought at that moment. I queasily slumped on the seat of a golf cart to await the arrival of our opponents.

If you, like me, can no longer stay awake past 10, the following descriptions of “The Man Show” episodes will convey the flavor of the Comedy Central program: “Adam and Jimmy pose as drunken pilots at an airport”; “Adam and Jimmy explore breast feeding”; “Adam and Jimmy lobby for a sexier Lady Liberty.” Adam and Jimmy—Adam Carolla and Jimmy Kimmel, the show’s hosts—seldom play golf but do drink beer as they work. Filling out their foursome would be Sal Iacono, who is known to “The Man Show” viewers as Cousin Sal, and Carson Daly, an MTV video jockey and NBC talk-show host who is a close friend of Kimmel’s.

Kimmel & Co. finally did arrive, an hour or so after our match was scheduled to begin; it turned out that they had stayed out even later the night before than we had. After brief introductions—“I’m just going to call them all ‘Bob,’” Kimmel said—we popped the day’s first beers. Mine turned out to be nowhere near

We ran our Dream Team through a skills challenge before they drank beer, then had the players take the test again after drinking while playing. The results:

- ◇ **Bob Hacker**  
(age 58, 13-handicap): 11 beers.
- ◇ **Brendan Foulois**  
(age 51, 11-handicap): 15 beers.
- ◇ **David Owen**  
(age 48, 9-handicap): 13 beers.
- ◇ **Jim Paisley**  
(age 53, 18-handicap): nine beers.

Drives Yardage on 20 tee shots	Pre-drink avg. 176.3	Post-drink avg. 187.0
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50-foot putts The 50-footer was slightly downhill, with a small break to the left.	Pre-drink	Post-drink
	0	Made it 0
	14	2-putts 13
	6	3-putts 5
	0	4-putts 2

Five-foot putts Level putt	Pre-drink	Post-drink
	12	Made it 12
	8	2-putts 8

Bunker shots From a greenside bunker	Pre-drink	Post-drink
	7	Bladed/ missed green 6
	2	Left in bunker 8
	11	Greens hit* 6
	*Pre-drink avg. (19 ft., 3 in.)	
	*Post-drink avg. (17 ft., 7 in.)	

110-yard shot over water	Pre-drink	Post-drink
	6	Missed green (but dry) 4
	1	Hit into water 6
	13	Greens hit* 10
	*Pre-drink avg. (11 ft., 7 in.)	
	*Post-drink avg. (13 ft., 4 in.)	

as disgusting as I had imagined. Soon, I was ready for another.

A conceptual flaw in the design of our experiment became apparent as soon as all eight of us had teed off: Because all the

players were drinking, we did not, technically speaking, have a control group. (“We’re drinking beer and you’re shooting heroin, right?” Carolla had asked.) There wasn’t time to recruit a third foursome, though, so we carried on. Our match was a nine-hole scramble, and it took four hours to complete. Highlights of our day, as recorded by a non-drinking nonparticipant:

►The first hole, a par 5, is halved with pars. Daly, who estimates his handicap at 12, is by far the longest hitter in the group.

►The second hole, a par 3, is won by the Golf Digest Dream Team, with a par. Paisley asks Kimmel to inscribe a birthday card for his daughter, who is about to turn 18. Kimmel writes: “Happy birthday, Caitlin. Don’t ever have sex.”

►On the third hole, a par 4, Kimmel relieves himself in a fairway bunker and shouts, “Look, my initials!” Daly is asked what effect alcohol has on his game. “It helps, to a point,” he says. To what point? “I’d say to the point when you start spraying your initials in a bunker.” Hole is halved with pars.

►After the Dream Team makes a birdie at 4 to go 2 up, Kimmel uses his car keys to punch holes in the sides of eight cans of beer, which the competitors then shotgun in unison. After Kimmel hits a 230-yard drive, he whiffs the next shot. Dream Team wins the next three holes to go 5 up.

►After the eighth and ninth holes are halved with pars—including a 25-footer by Carolla at the last—the Dream Team finishes 5 up and two under par. Hacker throws Iacono’s shoes into the lake, where they float like little boats. Kimmel lies on the ground and places a ball on a tee clenched between his teeth; Owen, after a couple of tentative practice swings, hits the ball with a pitching wedge. Hugs and tearful goodbyes all around.

#### THE BEER DRAW HYPOTHESIS

Back in 1995, in a book of mine called *My Usual Game*, I suggested that “the differ-



ence between a slice and a draw is a certain number of beers”—an idea I called the Beer Draw Hypothesis—and suggested that the ideal swing-oil dosage was “one and a half beers, or the equivalent, administered 15 minutes before teeing off and then carefully maintained throughout the round.” In Las Vegas, my friends and I were surprised to discover that alcohol’s influence continued well into the later stages of our stupefaction, and that the ideal dosage was probably twice my original estimate.

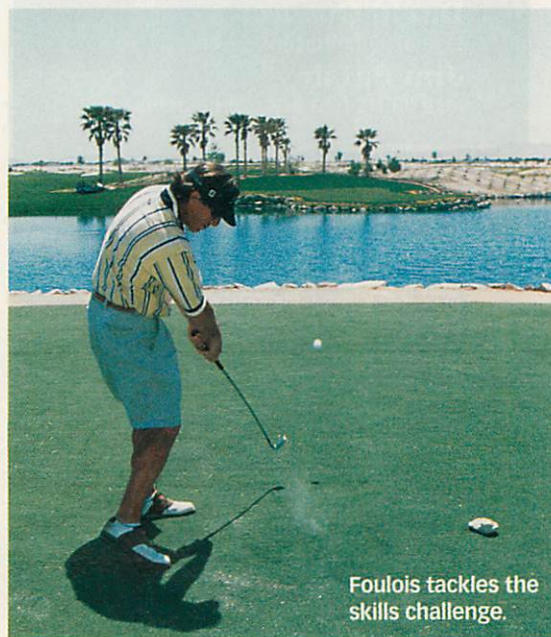
The day’s final drink totals: Paisley, 11 beers, one Bloody Mary; Hacker, 14 beers, one Bloody Mary; Foulois, 12 beers, two Bloody Marys; Owen, 12 beers, two Bloody Marys.

Still, if our study was going to have any true scientific validity, we understood, we needed hard numbers. On our third day in Las Vegas, therefore, Golf Digest put the Dream Team through a closely supervised multi-event skills challenge both before and after we had consumed a significant volume of beer. In each session, each player hit five drives, five 50-foot putts, five five-foot putts, five bunker shots and five 110-yard shots over water.

The results of the sober portion of the test are too tedious to go into (see chart). Suffice it to say that they bore out another theory of mine, which is that the average male golfer claims he hits his driver 250 yards, thinks he hits it 230, and actually hits it about as far as he hits his 6-iron. So let’s fast forward to the beer. As soon as we had each hit the last of our sober 110-yard shots over water, we grabbed hot dogs in the grillroom and headed to the first tee. The plan was that we would play a quick nine holes while getting oiled, then take the skills test again.

What happened next is a little vague to me now, but here’s the gist: We overdid the beer. During the two hours it took us to play nine holes, we drank almost as much as we had drunk during the entire previous day: an average of two six-packs apiece, or one beer every 10 minutes. (Foulois was the medalist, with 15 beers in two hours; I had 13; Hacker had 11; Paisley managed just nine.) The level of play was surpris-

ingly high. On the final hole, for example, Foulois hit a gorgeous 205-yard 4-iron—very possibly the best golf shot he has ever hit. But there were quite a few alcohol-related lapses, too. On the same hole, for example, I pulled my own approach shot slightly, causing my ball to kick left into a water hazard just short of the green. I found the ball a couple of feet from shore,



Foulois tackles the skills challenge.

**What happened next is a little vague to me now, but here's the gist: We overdid the beer.**

took off my shoes and socks, grabbed my sand wedge, and climbed down the bank. The pond turned out to be deeper than I had estimated; in fact, as I took my stance I could feel water filling the pockets of my shorts. Undeterred, I used Snell’s Law to calculate the angle of refraction, aimed for a spot several inches away from the apparent position of my ball, and fell over.

After we had finished that hole, we returned to the clubhouse for the drunken reprise of the skills challenge. All four of us made it through all five events, though only barely. The low point was the bunker test. We had all had trouble with this one even when sober, mainly because the sand

was very wet yet somehow also fluffy—but we really had trouble after a pair of six-packs each. In 20 tries, the four of us managed to put just six balls onto the green, and the best of those was nearly 11 feet from the hole. (Paisley left all five of his tries in the sand, then joined them.)

Even so, the skills test yielded some tantalizing data points: The group’s average drunk drive was 10 yards longer than its average sober drive (although both were less than 200 yards—the result of too many topped 40-yarders and too many screaming bananas into the desert); the difference between our drunk and sober putting results was too small to be statistically significant, but we drained more long putts when drunk (10 feet, eight feet, seven feet); on the 110-yard shot over water, we put six times as many balls in the lake when drunk, but put roughly the same number of balls on the green each time, and left them roughly the same distance from the hole.

When the final event in the skills challenge was blessedly over, a club employee was conscripted to drive us back to our hotel in our rented minivan. Late that night, after we had recovered to some extent, Paisley, Foulois and I actually went down to the Strip and hung around Mandalay Bay for a couple of hours. We ate overpriced Chinese food, and we surrendered a few hundred dollars at blackjack and craps, but we had pretty much lost our interest in science by that point. (Hacker had said he wanted to come, too, but he slept through his alarm clock, a wake-up call, half a dozen phone calls from us, and loud, sustained knocking, so we left him behind.)

During our flight home the next afternoon, it occurred to me that what the world really needs is a truly scientific study of the effect of alcohol on the golf swing. Maybe send a few guys out to Vegas for a few days, get them drunk, and see what happens. My buddies and I would definitely be interested in participating in something like that. I think I’ll bring it up at Golf Digest’s next editorial meeting. 🍷