

Warming up to golf's seasonal changes

In northwestern Connecticut, where I live, the golf season ends around Thanksgiving and doesn't start up again until income-tax time. During that 4½-month hiatus, my friends and I try to keep our swings alive by hacking around our snow-covered golf course with 7-irons and orange balls. When the sun is bright and the snow is deep, we track our shots by sound as much as by sight. Someone aims into the glare while everyone else stands still with one ear pointed down the fairway, waiting for a muffled thump. Then we trudge off in what we hope is the right direction, being careful not to confuse the trail by making too many new footprints. The orange balls glow eerily from the bottoms of their burrows, like domes of magma rising through the ocean floor. We dig them out, stamp down a teeing area and hit again.

I was introduced to glacier golf by four men, who at the time ranged in age from 65 to 80, and called themselves the Knuckleheads after their customary term of endearment (actually, that's not quite what they called themselves, but this is a family magazine). One of them later moved away, mainly because his wife had finally decided she'd had enough of New England winters. Two of the remaining three were once crack golfers with low single-digit handicaps. They have watched their swings erode over the decades, but they still turn out at 8 o'clock on most Saturdays and Sundays from December through February.

When they were younger, they used to end their winter rounds by lighting a fire in the unheated cabin that serves as our clubhouse and drinking Scotch, while frost formed on the insides of the windows. One bitterly cold January morning

long ago, the liquor froze in a glass that one of them had left on a table a few paces from the fire.

Nowadays, they usually play just nine holes; and they're happy if two out of three show up. They don't seem to mind it when I join them. Indeed, there are times when I feel a little bit like a Knucklehead myself. (According to the U.S. Golf Association, playing golf in the snow was invented by Rudyard Kipling, who used to paint balls red and hit them into tin cans buried in snow in the vast front yard of his house in Dummerston, Vt. Rudyard Kipling—the original Knucklehead.)

Playing golf in the snow is good for a golf swing. Snow dissipates the energy stored in a clubhead even more than sand or dirt does, so you have to keep your head still and swing smoothly. Each of us carries only a single club, a limitation that inspires inventiveness in shotmaking. It was while playing winter golf that I learned what must be the first principle of the golf swing: The key to achieving power is not effort but ease. Facing a 100-yard shot and having only a 7-iron with which to hit it, I swung easily and gracefully, launching my ball on a high, gorgeous, left-bending arc that ended deep within the woods behind the green.

In the spring, when the course is too wet to walk on, the Knuckleheads prowl

the edges of the fairways, looking for old balls that have popped up through the thawing ground like corpses of gangsters rising in the Hudson River. As the temperature climbs, the compressed snow at the bottoms of their footprints melts last, making what look like dance diagrams, or the work of a sewing machine gone wild. The course becomes green again in splotches. New buds and then small leaves incrementally obliterate the open winter views. Water trickles audibly but unseen in the curtain drains beneath the fairways. Antsy members drive hopefully into the parking lot, spot the COURSE CLOSED sign still dangling from the gate by the first tee and drive away.

My local course is always one of the very last in the area to reopen. The greenkeeper is exacting, and he is impervious to the scowls of members. The other club I belong to has better drainage and always opens a week or two earlier, and there's a public course nearby that always opens a week or two before that. As March draws to an end, my friends and I begin to hit the telephones, calling the most likely prospects each morning to ask for an update. "Not today," the pro will say. "Maybe on Tuesday, if the rain stops." Someone hears a rumor that a municipal course three towns away is already open, but the rumor turns out to be false. "Try again on Friday."

The Weather Channel gloomily persists in predicting rain. One night, the temperature plunges into the 20s, and in the morning the frost is so heavy you could almost believe the ground was covered with snow. Finally, though, the sun comes out for two days in a row, and the phone at the nearest public course is tantalizingly busy. "Eight o'clock tomorrow," a bored voice says when I finally get



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through. Summer always seems to end almost before it begins, but winter lasts for years.

In the very early spring, the courses in my area are often fogbound. I have sometimes played when the women's tees were invisible from the men's. Dense fog isn't necessarily bad for a golf swing. You can't see the trees or the ponds or the boundary walls. You force yourself to imagine the fairway, and then you swing. In fog you always seem to be alone on the course, even when, as is often the case, you really are. Then the fog lifts and the spring winds begin to blow.

My local course stays mostly empty until Memorial Day, regardless of the weather. Most of the older members are obedient creatures of the calendar. They put away their clubs after the first weekend in September, and they don't bring them out again until the last weekend in May. After that, the course begins to seem uncomfortably crowded on nice weekends. With luck, I've found my swing by then and can begin the gradual annual process of losing it.

I like golf in the dead of summer. The hot air loosens stiff muscles, a well-hit ball seems to float forever, the fairways and greens get hard. At last, you can put away your turtlenecks and begin the idiotically enjoyable task of deciding which souvenir golf shirt is most likely to bring good luck today, which you should save for tomorrow.

The sun seems never to go down. In July, you can rise at dawn and squeeze in 18 holes before work, or you can tee off after an early dinner and squeeze in 18 holes before tucking your children into bed, or you can do both. There is a club tournament of some kind almost every weekend.

Gradually, the mornings and evenings grow cooler. The sun's arc shortens and drifts lower in the sky. The



autumn light makes the course look breathtaking, but now even balls hit into the fairway are sometimes difficult to find. The drone of gasoline-powered leaf blowers replaces the drone of cicadas. In the trees behind the fourth green, the air smells vaguely of bourbon; it is the smell of wet earth and decaying leaves.

The course seems to smolder as you stand on the first tee, impatiently drinking coffee and waiting for the first frost of the late season to burn away. The greenkeeper moves all the pins forward and leaves them there, so that they will be easier to retrieve when the first hard freeze comes. You tee off at 3:30, but pack it in after 16, no longer able to see. Golf bags begin to disappear from the bag room. Golf balls go on sale. The pro runs out of spikes and doesn't bother to restock. The guy with the big compressor comes to blow water out of the sprinkler lines. Acorns falling on the clubhouse porch sound like errant golf balls. Against a sky the color of sheet metal, half a dozen crows chase a hawk in tight circles above the seventh green, nipping at its wings. Leaves fill the cups and you have to scoop them out before you can putt. At last, you can put away your golf shirts and begin the idiotically enjoyable task of deciding which souvenir golf sweater is most likely to bring good luck today and which you should save for tomorrow.

On the first day of December a couple of years ago, my friend Jim and I played our final round of the season. The temperature was in the low 50s,

but there were heavy clouds moving in from the north. The rain was supposed to begin that afternoon and turn to sleet the following day, and the temperature was supposed to drop below freezing and stay there. It was the last real golf day we would have for at least 4½ months; ahead lay nothing but icy winds and

Knuckleheads. Jim and I had the course entirely to ourselves. We both played well. I hit almost every fairway; Jim sank two chips. After 18 we were even.

The temperature was dropping but the rain hadn't come yet, so we decided to go around again. One down after eight, I birdied nine and pulled back to level. The wind was picking up. We decided to stop there.

I felt sad that the golf year was over, but not terribly sad. My swing felt solid, and I figured it would keep until spring. Jim and I stood on the first tee for quite a while, just looking at the course. "A good finish to a good season," Jim said. I agreed. Reluctant to leave, I dug a few old balls out of my bag, and we hit them into the woods. We cleared our stuff out of the bag room. I found an old hat of mine in the lost-and-found box. Then Jim and I shook hands. We went home.

The rain came down so hard that night it woke me. A couple of hours later, my son, who was 3, woke me again. He'd had a bad dream. As I got him a drink of water and put him back to bed, I noticed the rain had stopped. There was still no rain at 6 a.m., when the kids and I got up for good. We had breakfast and I read them some books. As I did, I kept glancing out the window. The sky was very gray, and the clouds were churning. The temperature was in the low 40s, but there was no rain and no frost. At 9, I called Jim.

Ten minutes later, we were back on the first tee. "The first round of the new season," Jim said. We teed off. ■