

John Updike's Remarks At USGA
Centennial Banquet In New York
January 27, 2009

The following speech was made by Pulitzer Prize-winning author John Updike at the USGA's Centennial Banquet held Dec. 8, 1994 at The Met in New York City.

When I was asked to speak to you this evening, my first thought was, "Oh, no - my golf is not nearly good enough!" But then I reflected that one of the charms of the game is that nobody's golf, not even Fred Couples' and Nick Faldo's, is good enough - good enough to please them and their supporters all the time. Golf is a game that almost never fails, even at the highest levels on which it can be played, to mar a round with a lapse or two, and that at the other extreme rarely fails to grant even the most abject duffer, somewhere in his or her round, with the wayward miracle miracle of a good shot. I am here - I have written so much about the game - because I am curiously, disproportionately, undeservedly happy on a golf course, and perhaps we are all here for much the same reason.

We are assembled, specifically, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the USGA. In the beautiful book observing this centennial, John Strawn's chapter on the history of the USGA was fascinatingly informative - the organization was founded, essentially, by a champion golfer, Charlie Macdonald, who resented a ruling and rough conditions which cost him a victory in the first American golf championship, played in Newport (Rhode Island) in 1894. Once the USGA had been founded, in the words of its first meeting's minutes, "to promote the interests of the game of golf" and "to establish and enforce uniformity of the Rules of the game," Charlie Macdonald was able to win the first official Amateur Championship, again at Newport, in 1895. Like the Church of England, then, the USGA was founded to ease one man's dissatisfactions, and the continuity in its Executive Committee, whose overlapping membership goes back to Macdonald, suggests the Episcopal laying on of hands.

Mr. Strawn points out, too, that from quite early on American golf differed in some particulars from its parent golf in Scotland and England; what was there a game of the people, played on otherwise worthless links land became here a game for gentlemen, played at private country clubs. And yet a democratic sense of fairness, we read, dictated the eventual demise of the stymie and the rise of the dainty custom of cleaning and marking your ball on the green. Primordial golf was a rough and ready game, wherein nothing but a club touched the ball between tee and holing out; you took the terrain and your luck as they came. But in the New World, the ideal of human perfectibility favored medal play over match play, and precise and faithful scorekeeping encouraged ever more perfect golf course conditions.

I wonder, one hundred years after Charlie Macdonald cried out for some rules and course standards, whether we Americans aren't in danger of taking golf too seriously - too mechanistically. The Canadian writer Arnold Haultain, in his book "The Mystery of Golf," perhaps the first extended literary meditation upon the game, evokes a humble golf course thus: "Certain links I know, far away on a western continent, a nine-hole course, miles from train or tram. Clubhouse there is none; you throw your covert coat and your hat over a fence and - play. There are no greens, there are no flags: the player more familiar with the ground goes ahead and gives you the line. The teeing grounds are marked by the spots where the soil has been scraped by the boot for the wherewithal for tees. Bunkers abound, and bad lies, in the form of hoof marks and cart ruts, do much more about - And yet to these links," he goes on, "daily gaily trudge ardent golfers, carrying clubs under a sub-arctic August sun."

Haultain, even the rhapsodic rhythm of his prose tells us, was happy on this course, and we might ask ourselves if our own happiness would be significantly diminished if our own courses had less than four different well mowed teeing areas, each framed by flower beds, and if the yardage figures were not inscribed on the sprinkler heads, and if the greens were a shade less smooth than pool tables, and if players without a medical certificate were forbidden to ride golf carts, and if metal woods were banned? Would American golf fall into irremediable melancholy if manufacturers ceased coming up with new lines of ever more ingeniously weighted and shafted clubs, with which pro shops can churn their clientele into an annual lather of technology-based hope? Would American golf, in short, be less happy if a bit less money were to wash through the grand old game?

When did American golf come of age? Some might say in 1904, when Walter Travis won the British Amateur Championship, the first foreigner to do so. Some might pinpoint the 1920s and the international admiration and affection won by the great Bobby Jones. But perhaps most would specify the happy moment in September of 1913 when the unknown 20-year-old Francis Ouimet beat the two foremost British players, Harry Vardon and Ted Ray, for the U.S. Open Championship - an upset that made news, not just golf news. The moment is commemorated by a USGA Centennial logo, based on a well-known photograph. Look at it; what do we see? Two figures, one of them our heroic golfer, a workingman's son who happened to live in a modest house across from The Country Club in Brookline, Mass. He picked up golf balls on his way to school, he watched the matches across the street, a member gave his older brother some cast-off clubs, the young Ouimets fell in love with the game. Francis played without fuss; needing, on the 18th green, needing to sink a 5-foot putt to enter a playoff with the Englishmen, he rapped it at the back of the cup without a second look. The next day, he calmly beat Vardon by five strokes and Ray by six. And who is the other figure in our logo, a little figure? He is Ouimet's caddie, a local 10-year-old called Eddie Lowery, carrying a canvas bag that looks to hold about eight clubs. Think of the caddies in today's championships - burly yardage technicians toting bags the size of small sofas, loudly blazoned with manufacturers' names for the greedy eyes of the television cameras.

We have come a long way in American golf, but has it been a journey without a price? Amid the million-dollar tournaments and the \$5 million clubhouses, might we be losing the unassuming simplicity of the game itself? This out-of-doors simplicity, surely, lies at the heart of golfing bliss, as we are reminded by our logo of two New England boys out for a walk on a drizzly September day. All it takes for a golfer to attain his happiness is a fence rail to throw his coat on, and a target somewhere over the rise.