

» MY FIRST TIME

Swing shift

IT WASN'T LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT, BUT AFTER GIVING GOLF A SHOT, A BEGINNING PLAYER **SURPRISINGLY GETS HOOKED**



Golf, from a distance, has always bored me. I used to drive by courses and see players tooling around in carts and leaning on clubs in their fancy pants and think, "I wonder what real athletes are doing today?"

As televised sports go, it's a real snoozer. Where's the clash of brute force? How about a drop of sweat, even? Naturally, I thought, it can't be much fun to play, either.

Well, I was wrong. And because I was so wrong, I've decided to go public with my confession:

In January, I was invited to La Quinta to nest in a sumptuous, 3,400-square-foot villa inside the Residence Club at PGA West. I looked forward to being a pampered princess that weekend. Susan, my guest, came for the golf. She took up the sport two years ago and

has been trying to sell it ever since.

"Lynn, it's a great way to meet men!" But don't men go golfing to escape women? I didn't see her logic.

Anyway, back at the villa. We were scheduled to play 18 holes on the Jack Nicklaus Tournament course. I don't

know anything about golf courses, but Susan said it was a good one.

Good and expensive. The moment we drove in, I knew I was out of my league. I've played

softball and tennis all my life and never once has a valet opened my car door, at the field or the club. They gave me a loaner set of clubs at the pro shop. Callaways. I don't know anything about clubs, but I assumed it was a decent set.

My first impression of golf? What a hassle! Even with the valet, there's a lot of preparation: stuffing things into bags



BY LYNN ARMITAGE

and carts, renting clubs, getting ice, worrying about the dress code and whether you're going to be thrown out because you're not wearing a collared shirt ... and then waiting to start, anxiously wondering who you'll be paired up with. The starter, a German named Karl, said we'd be playing with two men who were considering memberships. I told Karl, "How exciting! I've never played before." Karl didn't look well. "Oh..." was all he said. I think it was German for, "How did YOU get in?"

Our teammates were a father and son from Modesto who own a bank — and lots of attitude. I got the feeling they weren't happy to be paired with two women, especially one who had never played before. And it certainly didn't help matters when, after the older one told me he was a "seasoned golfer" and then hit a ball into the sand, I said, "You've been playing for 45 years and still hit it into the sand?"

Susan gave me an immediate crash course in golf etiquette.

THE LOVE AFFAIR BEGINS

Around the fourth hole, after losing a few balls to bushes and lakes, a funny thing happened. My game started to improve. I have great hand-eye coordination (that softball/tennis thing), and coupled with Susan's coaching, I started hitting amazing shots — a 100-yard approach shot and a 60-yarder, both pin-high on the green (Susan's words).

Then, on the eighth hole, a putting miracle occurred. Three balls were just a few feet from the pin. Mine, of course, was about 40 feet away. No problem. I'd been in this situation before at Bullwinkle's. I confidently tapped the ball with my putter and plunk. It went in! Call it beginner's luck, but I sank a 40-foot putt! But even more satisfying than performing this Tiger Woods-ish feat on my first time out was the look of surprised respect from the Modesto boys.

At that very moment, Susan and I became part of the brotherhood. We were one of the guys. For the first time, I looked around and noticed the towering San Jacinto Mountains and the blue, cloudless sky, and thought, "Oh ... I get it now." And I immediately fell in love with this frustrating game.

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

They say the best part about golf is the people you meet. Still swooning over my newfound love of golf, I decided to go to a range and hit a bucket of balls. (It WAS beginner's luck in La Quinta!) But I had forgotten how to swing. I kept missing the ball. I was cussing a lot. The guy next to me, who had a beautiful swing and an ear for trouble, felt compelled to help.

"You're swinging like it's a bat."

"Probably because I played softball for 30 years," I replied.

"Me, too," he said. "Professional ball."

"Oh?" I feigned interest. "Who with?"

"The Oakland A's."

OK, now he had me. I grew up in Sacramento and they were our team! Sacramento didn't have a professional ball club, so Oakland was the next best thing. Turns out, I was talking to John "Blue Moon" Odom, the starting pitcher from the curly-moustache era of the three-time World Series champs. He gave me tips on my swing, we talked for a while, he let me try on his World Series ring.

It was a great day for golf.

Afterward, standing among a debris field of broken tees, having just met a baseball star from the Dream Team of my childhood, I suddenly had clarity: Let's see, I don't have to sweat, there's plenty of chit-chat (between holes, of course), opportunities for chance encounters and, best of all, I get to go shopping for new clothes ... with collars.

I'll be darned. Golf is the perfect sport for me, after all. **SG**

Lynn Armitage, editor of OC Family Magazine, plans to spend the rest of her life doing penance on the green for thought crimes against golf.

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