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7 Steps^{to} Guilt-Free Golf & winning the game of life itself by John Wareham*

“BUT HOW CAN I PLAY GREAT GOLF, OR EVEN ENJOY THE GAME, WHEN I FEEL SO GUILTY?”

I’m being asked the question because my client knows that while I’m not a champion golfer, I extract great pleasure from the game. The uneasy query is something I’ve come to expect from overachievers, who typically fret about being unable to find an ideal “life balance.” How, they ask, can they optimize the competing needs of sport, career and family? The answer favored by golf fanatics is that golf *is* life! End of story, they say. But in fact life is about making choices, setting priorities and taking charge—then savoring every subsequent moment. So what’s the best way for a golfer to seize hold of life and achieve all of that? Let me offer seven suggestions:

1. *Be realistic in your expectations and meticulous in reporting your score.* Anxiety springs from the gap between idealized self-image and actual performance. It is effectively the unconscious fear of falling short. In fact, over-achievers tend to report their good rounds and omit their poor performances—then delude themselves into imagining they’re better than they really are. In both life and golf they become incapable of matching inflated expectations—and therefore justifiably anxious. So, the guilty golfer effectively suffers a self-inflicted threat to self-esteem, and sets himself up for failure. The cure is either realism and self-acceptance, or consistent hours of patient practice. But too much practice may steal from the other elements of a balanced life, so let’s consider other remedies.

2. *Play your golf in a sylvan setting.* Peaceful surroundings create inner harmony, too. An ideal golf course is a place where no modern structure

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ever interrupts one's commune with natural beauty. Settle into your game within the undulating volcanic hills that embrace some stunning Putnam courses, for example, and it becomes impossible to remain upright.

3. *Make every golfing minute count.* Nothing is more frustrating than rushing to the golf course then hanging around chewing fingernails while waiting to be assigned a tee time. Best to set the experience in



9th Hole at the Sedgewood Club

motion early, making a firm booking if possible, and arriving ahead of time. Or, if there is no other alternative, using those potentially frustrating minutes for shot-visualization and patient pre-game meditation. Fortunately for me, and to the chagrin of visiting opponents, the “unfair

home advantage” of the Sedgewood club is that there are no tee times, no lines and no hassles, so every moment is about the game itself.

4. *Shorten the number of holes you play, but compete on a challenging course.* Some people insist that if they haven't played 18 holes they haven't played a full round of golf. In fact, there's nothing sacrosanct about that number, and too many 18 hole courses are either flat and uninteresting or absurdly expensive. That's why for most golfers, a charming but challenging 9-hole course optimizes the time, maximizes the pleasure and provides the greatest bang for the buck. And, with proper attention to tee-box placement, an artful course designer can make 9-hole course *feel* like 18-holes.

5. *Engage in a game not a battle.* Play to win but be sure to *play*. Quash any feeling that your self-esteem is on the line. Whether for a 200 yard drive or a two foot put, we cannot successfully *steer* a golf ball. We must abandon all fear and *strike* it. In his classic book, *Zen and the Art of Archery*, Egon Herrigal says that to hit the target we must empty the conscious mind and bring “it” into play. But what, exactly, is “it?” Well, even though she's an atheist, my mother, a club champion golfer, swears that “God hits every great golf shot.” Perhaps “it” is the force that appears when we submit to what the Jesuits call natural law. So, take your time, forget your troubles, visualize a successful shot, then step right up and *hit* that ball. And, may the force be with you.

6. *Golf to your heart's content knowing that your family is having fun, too.* An individual needs alone time, and a family needs together time. Recreation—*re-creation*—is equally vital for both. The key is to belong to a club where individual needs and family demands *complement* rather than *conflict*. Typically, only exclusive private clubs offer tennis and swimming as well as golf, and the dues and initiation fees can be daunting. There are exceptions to that general rule, however. They're generally 9-hole courses in laidback resident communities, and decidedly “well-kept secrets.” If you're serious about enjoying guilt-free golf, however, the payoff will justify the sleuthing.



Family Fun at China Lake

7. *Wind down the day with friends and family.* If you can arrange for family members to do their own thing while you're out communing with nature, comrades and the golf ball, then a combined get-together at the end of the day can become a double treat. That's why so many of my golfing clubmates play the course then close out the day with a swim and lakeside barbecue and merlot among friends and family as the orange sun sinks slowly into those stunning Sedgewood hills.



Sun over spring-fed China Lake and several holes at the Sedgewood Golf Course

Here's the bottom line: somebody said that taking up the game of golf is like becoming entangled in a love affair: “If you don't take it seriously it's no fun, but if you do take it seriously it will break your heart.” Well, as I see it the way to come out a winner in the game of life is to take both the infatuation of golf and the love of family seriously, indeed. And that if we can do that, then with just a modicum of luck, life itself can become an affair to remember. §