

Diary of a golf junkie: a passion for beer and blondes turns to golf skill - Golf Guide
[Greater Baton Rouge Business Report](#), [April 23, 2002](#) by [Mukul Verma](#)

There may be more words written about golf than about baseball, two games that require people to hit balls with sticks. Both command devotion among players and fans, who believe that God is hiding in the links and diamonds.

Remembering that this fanatical devotion runs counter to my easy cynicism, I kept my distance from both avocations most of my life. But my friends, some of them even decent people, were lured by golf over time. One by one, as they grew older, they gave the game a try and became addicts, then pushers.

I remained steadfast until I heard this alluring pitch: Golf, I was told, required me to spend five hours with male friends, smoking fat heaters and drinking beer.

Golf couldn't be that difficult, I believed. After all, one of the top players is a self-confessed drunk and some pros look like they should be dining with Jenny Craig.

So a few years ago, with used clubs from my friend, Chuck, I headed to the driving range. Chuck met me there to teach me the basics, turning me into a pretzel when all I wanted to do was rear back and take a violent swing at the dimpled ball.

I tried it my way. It didn't work. I tried it Chuck's way. It worked one out of a hundred times. When it did work, it was magic. The metal striking the ball made an ethereal ping. The ball zipped through the air for more than 200 hundred yards--and became part of the distance.

Over the next two years, I took my game to the driving range and whacked away at the ball, improving enough to try a real course. And early last fall, on a postcard-blue day, I awoke in a beach house, put on new golf shoes, grabbed used clubs and went with two friends to the Peninsula Golf Club at Gulf Shores, Ala.

We were greeted at the club by a servant, a man in a polo shirt and pressed pants who was the first of many to obey our orders. He loaded our clubs into the cart and made sure all was well. I could hear my mother's voice clouding my head, chastising me for not lifting the clubs myself. But I was paying for the service, and it wasn't cheap. The round cost \$78, not including tax. That's \$4.30 per hole, about the price of a biggie cup of Starbucks or a top Belgian chocolate.

We moved to the first tee, taking our time to gaze at the lush surroundings and privately say, "amen." My first shot was a miracle, landing squarely in the middle of the fairway, a chip away from that thick carpet of golf dreams. My second shot went the wrong way, and so went the game, this way and that all afternoon.

Every half hour or so, a blonde with an Eastern European accent drove by in a cart and offered us drinks. Three beers and 18 holes later, I was a golf convert.

But just as quickly, my marginal game went south. For a while, I couldn't even connect with the ball. To hide my shame, I would only play at historic City Park, among the worst-maintained courses in the world, a place where the rough is all dirt, where the only amusement is watching joggers dodge fast-moving cars on Dalrymple Drive.

Still, golf dripped into my personal life. My wife, an unflappable Midwesterner, launched into passive complaints about the time I spent on the sport. Her argument was that I would wake up at 7 a.m. to play golf but wouldn't get up that early to spend time with her or with our shiny new baby girl. My response--that if I weren't playing golf Saturday mornings I would just be sleeping--did not hold water.

Yet, possibly covering for marrying someone who is pitiful at a game, she bought me golf lessons. Go figure.

Ray Garbiras now is my hero. Sure, the word "hero" is tossed around these days with no thought. But this guy has "it." He didn't save anyone from drowning; he probably hasn't helped an old lady cross a street in recent days; he hasn't saved the world like our frat boy president. But Ray, the golf pro at The Island, taught me the mantra of the golf swing.

"Tempo! Tempo! Tempo!" said Ray, teaching me that an unhurried swing would keep me from resembling Jim Carey on speed. Ray worked in the tone of a Zen master and with a patience normally not known among people so young.

"Practice with the 7-iron until your hands bleed," said Ray. I swung enough to get a blister that turned blood red, then hard-worn.

"Keep your head down," said Ray. I never look up now.

My game has become better, but not by much. Unlike my hero, I can't hit a 7-iron for 175 yards, though once I pushed one straight and true, past that 175-yard mark. That has kept me coming back to the game, a junkie with a fever and a stick.