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An Iron to the Head

Joshua Matthews

I might be the only golfer in history to leave a tournament early because of a head wound from a violent blow. I make this claim with some pretension of vanity, to make up for the shame and disgrace of the event itself. Sure, a lot of golfers have to disqualify themselves from tournaments for injuries, usually wrist, back, or knee injuries, but these happen from ordinary golf use—there's no glory in any golf injury. Nobody is impressed by a disqualification for a bad back.

But I suffered what was probably a concussion during a golf tournament, the kind of injury that happens only to the more alpha-athletes, like football players and wrestlers.

The story is that I played high school golf, sometimes mediocrity, sometimes badly.

In rural Midwestern American high schools, or at least in north-central Indiana where I am from, golf is not a respectable sport. It carries none of the alpha-male activities—hitting, tackling, grappling—that win respect from high school males. Worse, it carries negative class connotations, as in, if you can actually afford to play golf, you must be richer and thus better than the Joe Sixpack class, which is approximately 97% of the population of my home county.

I started playing golf just because. My aunt and uncle had a yard 200 yards long and let me hit golfballs there. They took me to the golf course, my only mode of transportation there until my first car as a high school senior.

This was a problem, because to become a good golfer, you have to play and practice. My aunt and uncle lived five miles from me; if I wanted to get there, I had to ride my bike. The nearest golf course was ten miles away. For most of my scholastic golfing career, I had no car.

So I was a golfer who didn't golf, at least not

much. The only time I could practice was after school in the spring, when our coach drove us all to the golf course. In summers I depended on rides. Forget about fall and winter.

Meanwhile, most of the other high school golfers at other county schools lived on golf courses, had their memberships paid for, had dads who made more money than I could dream of, so that they could afford to buy their sons Ping Zing and Taylor Made, the name brands that really let you hit a golfball well. Me, I had woods actually made of wood and cheap garage-sale irons that looked like they dated from the origins of golf in Scotland.

You name it, I have done it in a golf tournament. Hitting multiple shots in a row out of bounds—yes. Hitting houses—yes. Five-putting—yes. Scoring a 12 on one hole—yes. Whiffing—yes. Most of my follies occurred during junior high, my first two years of golfing, but they were enough to scar me even when I was a decent golfer shooting in the low 40s for nine holes.

Every time I did something horrific, the better, richer, smuggler golfers from other schools, the ones with loaded dads and awesome golf clubs, would be amused. They liked playing our school, filled with golfers like me, all of whom lived miles from any golf course and who rarely practiced. They got their fill of amusement.

One time—I think I was a freshman—I scored a 60 on nine holes. It was on the golf course where the richest kids in the county lived. When I came into the clubhouse with that score, my coach just looked at me with a sad face and said, "I could do better than that with just my putter."

What I discovered, as a pious evangelical Christian kid, was that there's a good solution to the problem of repeated humiliation during golf tournaments. Cheating.

Cheating is probably the ignored crucial fac-

tor in golf, the one that all amateurs know about but no professional would be caught dead even thinking about. It happens all the time in casual rounds; there are official names for accepted cheating: mulligans, gimmes, foot wedges.

For high school amateurs capable of scoring a 12 on any one hole as I was, cheating seems like a viable option.

You should know that golf has very strict rules that seem cruel. You must play the ball where it lies, even if it has mud on it or sits in a divot in the fairway. If you touch your ball with your club, that's a stroke. If your ball moves while you address it, even if you don't touch it, that can be a stroke. Most amateurs sense that these rules are too harsh, too unforgiving for a game that is maddening, and so they bend the rules during casual rounds.

Admittedly, I cheated too much in high school golf. Despite being a good outward Christian, one who was trying to witness to the potty-mouthed high schoolers that I played with, I believed in the rules of karma when I cheated. Cheat too much, Josh, and the golf gods will get you. So I cheated only sometimes, not a lot, yet enough to make me think that my day of total humiliation was coming.

There are too many basic ways to cheat in golf tournaments to recount here, including mis-marking putts and moving balls without being seen. Sometimes, if you had the right guys in your group, golfers from another high school who didn't mind lying, you could agree with them that everybody in your group could shave off a few strokes. Who else would know besides the group?

My preferred way to cheat demanded only first that I was humiliated enough to do so. I was too dignified to cheat unless things were going badly.

Here was my method. Whenever I hit a ball into the woods or deep grass or so far from civilization that it took a Sherpa and several yaks to locate my golfball, I would encounter a problem. I might not be able to find my golfball.

That set up the perfect cheating circumstance. When your ball is far from where it ought to be, the fairway, you are probably going to be looking for it by yourself. The rules of golf dictate that, if you can't find your ball within five minutes of looking, you must proceed back to where you last

hit a ball and re-hit there.

If I had to do that, and it was fairly often, I would then be going backwards 200 yards, probably encountering another group of high school golfers behind ours. If they were to see me walk back and re-hit, they would know that I was doing very badly, that I had hit an errant shot, that I am a terrible golfer.

In high school, as in so much of the rest of life, as I have learned, vanity trumps ethics. If I couldn't find my ball, then I would covertly, very carefully, pull a ball out of my bag and, without being seen, drop it on the ground. Then I would proceed to play with this ball.

I acknowledge that this is against the esteemed rules of golf. But again, what is the difference between shooting 48 and 52 on nine holes? Especially when your team is being clobbered by another team. My cheating had no consequences; it would not have decided tournaments. It only made me look slightly better than I was. Bad, yes, but not terrible.

It was on the fourth hole of the conference tournament, sophomore year, when things were going terribly. I was around eight over at that point, setting myself up for an atrocious score that would contribute nothing to the team. I had just hit my drive so far right into the trees that nobody but me was headed in that direction.

I searched for my ball. Nothing. No white shiny little ball anywhere in that long grass, underneath a hundred trees.

I did what I had done before. Reached into my bag, pulled out a ball, and covertly dropped it. Play on!

Except the dread of karma haunted me.

We proceeded to the next hole. The tournament was brutally slow; we had to wait on the group in front of us for every shot. As we were waiting, the golfers in the group were talking, casual golf chat about girls, cars, and whatnot.

I walked up behind one of the golfers, who had a club in his hand. I stood there, not paying attention, thinking about my sin on the previous hole. I had done it again. I had dropped a ball when I shouldn't have. "I wish I weren't here," I thought.

Then, bam. I woke up on the ground. Where am I? What happened? Why does my head hurt?

The group of high school golfers were stand-

ing over me. “Hey man, are you alright?” one of them said. “Hey, look at his head. Somebody get a coach.”

“Just stay on the ground,” another one of them told me.

Soon enough, a golf cart drove up. They picked me up, put me in it, and carted me off to the clubhouse.

What had happened? The kid that I was standing behind had decided to take a practice swing. He didn’t know that I was there. He swung back, hard, and I took a Ping Zing to my left eyebrow.

My forehead right above my left eye swelled up to, well, yes, the size of a golf ball. I was some-

what delirious. When my coach saw me, he looked at my scorecard and said, “you should have played with your putter.”

Looking at the golf ball in my head, everyone told me not to go to sleep because I might never wake up again.

My parents drove thirty minutes to pick me up, and they took me home early. While I was riding home in their car, I realized that I had done something I had never done before. I had ended the tournament with a total score, for nine holes, under par. All it took was secret cheating and an iron to the head.