

Coming Home To Golf

BY LANCE COMPA

For a mainstream sports buff turning 40, golf takes on a new allure. Unexpected, even unwanted at first, a re-awakened passion for the game has snuck up on me in the past year. After all, golfers excel with the best traits of those of us who have been through the mill a bit: nerve, judgment, timing and consistency. When a fan turns 40, subtlety and elegance replace sheer force as the highest order of sporting skills.

I played a lot of golf when I was a kid in the working class Italian-American village of East Rochester, N.Y., the same town that produced Sam Urzetta, the U.S. Amateur champion of 1950. There were probably eight or 10 golf professionals in our little village of 8,000 residents.

For five years until I could get a full-time job, I caddied when school let out. Every summer morning at dawn, I hitchhiked with a buddy to the clubs that lay between our town and the city of Rochester: Oak Hill Country Club, which has hosted the U.S. Open and the PGA Championship, the Country Club of Rochester, Irondequoit Country Club, Monroe, Locust Hill. Eight dollars for doubles—two bags—was a “good loop.” Six dollars was a “stiff,” \$10, a gold mine.

The club let us play a round on Monday mornings, and by the time I was 15, I got my game into the low 90s. Not bad, but nothing special—some of my friends were breaking 80. Anyway, I learned to appreciate the



concentration and skill needed to hit a little ball with a big stick toward a small hole. I was a fan, too, thrilling at Arnold Palmer's final-round 65s and closing birdies to win major championships in the early 1960s.

But, by the mid-60s, I could work for wages at good-paying jobs in busy Rochester factories where my father and his friends worked. Summer jobs for their sons were among the rites of passage. Caddying was for kids. It was time to say goodbye loops, hello timeclocks.

I was also filling out then and doing well in schoolboy sports. Baseball, basketball and football were the most fun. Running, tackling, twisting, jumping; a perfect give-and-go, or a double play; all these were action and

adventure compared to the repetitiveness of golf's swing and walk, swing and walk, chip and walk, tap and bend.

Golf was, well, boring. We were into the late 60s and Palmer was in eclipse. A pudgy, plodding, efficient Ohioan named Nicklaus was golf's king now. Some king. This was the Age of Aquarius—*Steal This Book*, *Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty*, Broadway Joe, the Amazin' Mets, Yaz, the Grateful Dead and the Airplane, *I Am Curious, Yellow*. But the Golden Bear? Forget it.

Then came the 1970s. It was a beginning of adulthood for work, but I didn't let go of boyhood games. In the summer there were softball leagues and night basketball, and on fall weekends we had some serious touch football games. I couldn't say who won any major golf tournament in the 1970s. The names, yes. I read the sports pages. Nicklaus, Watson, Player, Trevino. Ray Floyd? Johnny Miller? Hale Irwin? I couldn't tell who won what tournament in which year.

By the end of the 1970s, entering my mid-30s, the touch football games had stopped. There was still a weekly basketball game with a regular crew of friends. I mostly settled for perimeter jump shots. But with an opening to the hoop, I could still get a quick step on a defender and drive for a double-pump reverse layup.

I took that step last year and fell on my face. Now, and for the duration,

it's perimeter jump shots and even a two-hand set, the sure shot of my childhood.

That got me thinking about another youthful memory: swatting a golf ball down the fairway on a crisp, dewy morning and snaking a long putt into the cup. During the final round of the 1986 Masters, I watched, tense with excitement and choked with sentiment, as the same Golden Bear I had scorned in my youth redeemed the doubts of age.

Visiting home last summer, I went to see an uncle who manages a driving range and a par-3 course in East Rochester. It was the evening and things were slowing down. We were 70 yards from the first green. "Go ahead and hit one," said my uncle, dropping a ball in front of me and handing over a 9-iron. It was the first time in more than 20 years that I had held a golf club.

I figured that if I hit the ball at all it would probably just dribble a few yards. I didn't bother thinking about swing fundamentals, the mechanics. My mind was like the cold innards of a camera behind the lens of my eyes.

The impression that sticks with me now is one of effortlessness. When I hit the shot it was more like an act of imagination, not feeling the impact of the clubhead striking the ball. The rest was a picture, too—a soft, lofting shot that dropped on the green, bit and rolled stiff to the pin, three feet from the cup. "Nice one," said my uncle, who sees a lot of them.

Nice one? It was Bobby Jones completing the Grand Slam in 1930. It was Hogan winning the Masters, the U.S. and the British Opens in 1953. It was Arnie at Cherry Hills, Trevino at Oak Hill. But I was the only one who knew that.

Then I started to think about proper technique. That ruined everything. Succeeding swings produced a lousy series of hooks, fades, shanks and whiffs. But that one shot, when the 15-year-old caddie abiding deep within brought his primal talent to these 40-year-old hands, was thrill enough to resolve at least one mid-life crisis. To hold on to youth, I'm going to play golf again. ☺

Lance Compa is a lawyer from Washington, D.C.