

IS GOLF GETTING SOFT?

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The most direct method of finding an answer to this question may be to ask another. What particular feature of amateur sport may be said to offer the greatest attraction to its devotees? The second question is not difficult to answer. Unquestionably there is one common factor present in all those participant amateur activities which have firmly established their popularity over a period of time. It makes no difference whether it be golf, yachting, tennis or lawn bowling, in order to endure, any sport must offer a challenge; there must be a test of the skill and the fortitude of those who participate in it.

It is, of course, true that the tests which any sport offers are artificial. They are created by the rules which establish the conditions under which the sport is played. There must be a sense of equity in these governing rules and there must be the opportunity for reward through superior performance. But, since amateur sport activities are indulged in for pleasure and not for profit, there is no need to provide reward for the less fortunate and less skilled. In sport, learning how to lose is as important as knowing how to win. In the game of civilized living, all the competitors are entitled to some share in the winnings whereas in amateur sport, win or lose, the important return comes from the playing of the game.

Since, in amateur sport, the return to the individual lies in the pleasure of participation, it should follow that the keener the test of skill and fortitude the greater should be the popularity of that particular sport. The record of our leading sports serves to indicate that this is true. The continued performance of those things which are easy to do becomes a bore.

Since the turn of the century there has been a great upsurge of interest in sports. With this growth of interest have

come two great changes. First, more money is being made from participation in sport than ever before and second, the general spread of the welfare attitude of caring for the less skilled and less fortunate has created the false conception that a sport is improved by making it easier.

These twin influences tend to destroy the two basic features which give strength and popularity to participant sports. A new and a foreign element is introduced when an amateur sport is indulged in for the prime purpose of making money. It can no longer be played, win or lose, for pleasure alone. Again, a new and a different factor is introduced when the attempt is made to favor the less skilled by making a sport easier. Any game loses its challenge when it is softened to accommodate the tastes of the majority of its participants.

These influences, commercialization and the softening process, have affected both the spirit and the rules governing sporting activities. Both have worked in the same direction; toward the lowering of the standards of amateur sport.

Unfortunately along with all other amateur sports, the game of golf has also suffered from these influences. There are many manifestations. The use of carts by so many of those quite able to walk two rounds a day. The insistence on playing winter rules when course conditions are only slightly short of perfection. The interest to make money from golf through Calcuttas and other organized forms of gambling. The attitude of condoning and even encouraging violation of the Amateur Status regulations by subterfuge. These indications and many others, show that all is not healthy in the game of golf.

But unquestionably the most serious situation concerns the constant pressure to deprive golf of its character by changes in the Rules. There is, of course, no conscious effort to destroy the game of golf by these means, even though this may be the ultimate result. The difficulty is

that those who advocate easier Rules, do not have either the skill or the fortitude to face the conditions which may occur under the present code of Rules. Their solution is to make the game easier.

By way of example, in 1960 the repair of ball marks on the green became legal. This was a change strongly advocated by the "friends of golf" and time may prove it to be an improvement. However, this new Rule makes a greenkeeper of each golfer and for the first time there has been a breach in the principle that the golfer must play the course as he finds it. At least to a limited extent, the course may now be adjusted to suit the convenience of the golfer.

A further danger lies in the fact that it is only a little step from the repair of the green to the repair of such conditions as divot holes on the fairway. One by one the challenges which have made the game great can be removed. If there is to be a reward in golf it belongs to the player

with the skill necessary to play from difficult situations.

We must not make golf too easy.

The stymie is another example of a Rule change dictated by popular demand. Perhaps its demise was justified by the occasional time it produced a truly unfair situation, but with it the game lost the requirement for a skillful and dramatic shot and the need for wise and alert play around the hole.

And finally, the experimental changes for 1960 in Rules 29 and 30, have brought us to the threshold of another change dictated by the demand for softer Rules. In this case the final decision has not yet been made. There is, therefore, no more appropriate time for all golfers to ask themselves the question, is golf getting soft? Have the 1960 experimental Rules made golf a greater game or will they weaken the principles which have made it the most popular of all amateur participant sports?

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