

In Praise of Golf's Many Benefits

"The only reason for the existence of golf and other games is that they promote the health, pleasure and even the prosperity of the community."

... So commented Dr. Alister Mackenzie in his posthumously published book, "The Spirit of St Andrews." It is a typically definitive, Mackenzie-esque quote. Famed for his very forthright views (but then he was a Scotsman raised in Yorkshire), Mackenzie probably should have said "the best reason" rather than "the only reason," although he doubtless thought "only would lend emphasis to a statement he passionately believed in. Definitive and passionate words in their day, then, but are they still accurate and relevant?

Golf (and other games, but arguably golf especially) certainly facilitates a healthy and healthier community. Of course, Mackenzie would have appreciated this better than most by virtue of his experiences as a medical practitioner.

One of my favorite Mackenzie utterances was his observation, "How frequently have I, with great difficulty, persuaded patients who were never off my doorstep to take up golf, and how rarely, if ever, have I seen them in my consulting room again." And of course there is no-end of statistics to vouch for the fact that copious amounts of fresh air and plenty of not-too-strenuous exercise is beneficial. While one of my least favorite utterances is Mark Twain's alleged remark that "golf is a good walk spoiled" – a foolish man if he said it, though even he admitted that golf is a good walk. Speaking of which, and having earlier referred to Mackenzie's opinionated forthright nature, I cannot help wondering what the good doctor would have made of modern golf carts!

Mark Twain notwithstanding, golf undoubtedly provides a huge amount of pleasure to an enormous number of people – 50 million at the last count: surely we are not all masochists?

So golf gives pleasure to many, but is it also an activity we should promote? I would argue that it is so good for body and soul that we should. It is often remarked how very few people of advanced years are overheard to say, "You know, I really wish I'd spent more time at the office" ... but equally I'm sure there are countless people who have looked back on their lives and commented, "You know, I wish I'd played more golf" or, more pointedly, "If only I had played more often in that Father & Sons event at XYZ." Golf (again I'd suggest rather more so than most games) can be played well into later life and it makes retirement more pleasurable – occasionally adding goals and even purpose to old age. In short, golf keeps people active and happy.

Golf causes the community to prosper? Absolutely it does – it did in Mackenzie's day and it continues to do so in many diverse ways. In fact, golf often creates a sense of community as it is an extremely sociable activity, affording numerous opportunities for participants to meet new people and to get to know existing acquaintances better. After all, what other sports have the equivalent of "the 19th hole?!" Golf and the environment is too big a topic to discuss here – suffice to say that I fervently believe that well-conceived and well-built golf courses can be extremely good for the environment, especially in urban areas where they provide the "green lungs" that benefit golfers and non-golfers alike.

How does golf help the community financially prosper? It is responsible for a vast number of jobs for one thing - from caddies to club pros and from superintendents to hospitality managers...it even provides work for architects! Each year, golf raises millions of dollars for charitable causes within the community; and then of course there is The First Tee Program. While chiefly a past-time and leisure pursuit, the game can also help to develop and improve general business activity - not only because of its ability to bring people together and provide a platform for forward-thinking conversation within a conducive environment, but also because of its core values such as "friendly competition;" good etiquette and good ethics; achieving success through your own endeavor; and that neatest of truisms: "in golf, as in life, you play it as it lies."

Mackenzie passed away more than 80 years ago and his words were written in a very different age, yet I would contend that they are as relevant today as they have ever been – and moreover, as golf course architects, we should not only regularly remind ourselves of their wisdom but we practically have a duty to espouse their sentiment as often and, yes, as passionately as possible.

As always, I want to hear what you think. I hope you'll be in touch:

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- Steve Smyers, 2015 - 16 President