



Reflections of a River Rat:

Golf's 4-letter word: S-L-O-W

By Jim Holleran

My watch blinked the bad news after we finished opening night in our golf league. I wasn't checking the dial for anything fancy like how many calories I burned, how far I walked, or the number of shots I hit. I checked the time and let out a little sigh at the back of the ninth green at Shadow Lake Golf Club in Penfield.

It took our foursome 2 hours and 35 minutes to play, 20 minutes behind the suggested pace of play. We kept pace with the group ahead of us so someone commented that our time was "not bad." He knew this was league play, which is notoriously slow. In spring, the mowers can't keep up with the deepening rough; it swallows shots. Guys are pacing back and forth searching for their ball. They take



extra time to putt downhill sliders or become consumed with an extra practice swing or three because they're frustrated by stray shots. Guys are too worried about their scores and their impact on league standings after only one week. Chillax, it's a 16-week season.

When I glanced at my watch, it didn't lie. I had already done the math. If we had played 18, our round would last 5-plus hours. That seemed like an eternity to me, the guy who was once a deliberate, make that turtle-like, better yet make that a creeping glacier of a player best defined by a four-letter word: S-L-O-W.

I am reformed. My preferred modus operandi is to arrive 15 minutes before sunrise when there is enough ambient light to see the ball and the fairways are reserved for grazing deer. Stretch the back, warm the shoulders with a couple of swings, then start the timer on my watch. Swoosh, crack, pick up the bag and don't look back ... let the hacking begin. No lesson plans to carry out in the classroom or page deadlines to meet in the newsroom -- leave that to the working stiffs. I am eating up this retirement -- a giant slice of apple pie with ice cream on top.

My average for 18 holes is 2 hours, 40 minutes. No cart; I carry my bag and walk. That's part of the 5-mile walk of fame, or is it shame? My only wish would be to drop a few pounds to get on the south side of 235 pounds.

These speedy morning rounds represent my golf renaissance. It wasn't this way when I started playing at St. Lawrence State Park Golf Course around age 14. My buddies and I never learned to play the right way. No instruction on the fundamentals, just copying the swings we saw on TV. No work on the practice range or putting green. We sweated each putt because Nicklaus and Watson did. We'd drop balls for extra shots as if our last names were Mulligan. It was not surprising. My earliest experience was digging holes in the backyard, lining them with Styrofoam cups

and trying to roll in shots across the lumpy lawn. I don't know which irritated my mother more – defying the ban on the holes in the backyard or hitting dirty balls into the freshly laundered bedsheets on the clothesline.

One of our Morristown peers, Billy Colburn, was the first to get his driver's license and advocated the Sunday night sneak-on-the-course method. We piled in his mom's station wagon and conspicuously parked in the lot. We had no money for greens fees. It worked once or twice, but we quit when we got kicked off by a groundskeeper.

Billy and his brother Andy got me involved in some landscaping at Pine Eden, a riverside estate up the river from Jacques Cartier State Park. Our employer, Harold Munson, was a fascinating man who loved to hold court with his young charges, and we nodded on every word. He recounted how a golfer left a putt on the lip of the cup, but saved himself a stroke. He shaded the ball from the sun, it contracted a smidgen of a millimeter, then fell into the cup. Later that summer, Billy faced that situation during a road trip to Raymondville. He laid down on the green to shade the ball until a man came belling from the clubhouse. We grabbed our clubs and piled into the station wagon. It was like the Lord of the Flies meets golf.

One of the older guys who would drive us to the course routinely blew a fuse on the golf course. He was our adult role model so when he threw clubs, swore at the course, the game and himself, we thought it was acceptable. Any character from Caddyshack would have been a better choice.

Sometimes, crazy stuff emerged from our lousy skills. The homes along the sixth hole at Shadow Lake



are tight to the fairways. I hit a towering fade onto a roof, prompting a woman to rush out, scoop up the ball and demand an explanation. I simply kept walking. What could I admit? That I stunk? Tell her to sell the house?

One of my sportswriter pals and I were waiting on a tee at Genesee Valley Park one day when we decided to turn 90 degrees and launch old balls into the woods. The only problem was my buddy hit a pop fly shank 90 degrees further right. It landed somewhere up on Interstate 390 South during rush hour. Explain that one to your insurance adjuster.

But that is all behind me. I'm the guy who practices in a light rain, has the patience to watch golf on TV, and cleans his clubs in the living room when his wife is away.

My threshold is about 45 degrees. I have played in December, January and February. I am still mourning the closing 5 years ago of Shadow Pines Golf Course, a challenging track just two miles

from my house. This was the place where I made my hole-in-one. This is the place we played in searing heat of summer or spring snowflakes. When its closing was announced, we ventured out to play it on 50-degree days in January. With no snow cover, it was easy to play on the dormant grass fairways. Some golfers had placed sticks in the holes and we played through some ice on a few greens. As soon as one of my old sportswriter buddies mentioned it in a column, the No Trespassing signs went up. The jig was up.

I played enough last fall to get my scores back into the mid-80s. Now, after 5 months of inactivity, I have to recapture that groove.



In my first warmup for the golf league, I topped so many shots and gassed enough putts to shoot 59. I wanted to stop the world and get off. The second time out, a herd of young deer stubbornly occupied the center of a fairway, probably the safest place on the course. I imagined they were mocking me.

“Hey, mom, when you hit a ground ball like that guy, do you get fined if you don’t run it out?”

“No child, that is called pro baseball.”

I had to stop that mess after a bout of low blood sugar, but finished with a 55. On league night, I missed a couple of four footers but got it down to bogey golf for the last five holes in a round of 50.

My game is building. Probably not to the point three years ago when my partner Jim and I won the league, but we're doing better than our meltdown last year on the final week of the season. The team that finishes last must run the league the next season. That entails collecting fees, entering hole-by-hole scores for 24 players into the website, settling disputes, and listening to bitching.

We faced this prospect last season as we entered the final Wednesday night. We were one place ahead of last, but Jim figured we needed just four of the weekly 13 points to be safe. Let the choking begin. We buried drivers into the woods. We botched putts. No problem, said my partner. We still only need to win a couple of holes. The choking continued. When we reached the last hole of the season, the last-place team was watching, and hoping. We hadn't even putted out and they were asking us what we shot. When the scores were totaled behind the green, we learned our fate. We finished a half-point north of last. Phew! Bullet dodged.

Now those two must deal with this year's first headache – slow play. They'll have to deal with the foursome behind us that fell over a hole behind. One guy shot 75 ... for 9 holes. Good luck speeding up that.

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