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THE NEVER-ENDING PAGEANT

You may think you can hold your own when conversation around the dinner table settles on golf's inexhaustible fascination. Don't get overconfident: golf's greatest exponents don't claim to understand, or have mastered, the game. 'Deceptively simple and endlessly complicated, rewarding and maddening' was Arnold Palmer's definition; at least, we think it was golf he was talking about, not Mrs Palmer. Mark Twain is credited with 'a good walk spoiled', a common reaction after a round that started well but ended in disappointment. Neither is exactly the last word on 'that never-ending pageant, which men call Golf' (PG Wodehouse).

Often dismissed as a pastime for old buffers, golf is in fact the bluffer's game par excellence. At its simplest, it is about pretending to be a better, or a worse, golfer than you are. At a more advanced level, it is about bluffing your way to victory, or at least a less ignominious defeat,

in any number of ways that come under the broad umbrella of psychological warfare. Your greatest strength is the extent to which you are successful in reading and playing your opponent, not the ball.

“ Golf is deceptively simple and endlessly complicated rewarding and maddening ... the greatest game mankind has ever invented”

Arnold Palmer

By your words, actions, body language, deployment of the rule book and even your choice of outfit, you can bluff your adversary into using the wrong club, conceding a putt or accepting a penalty. You can inspire in him* thoughts of self-fulfilling defeatism or lift him up to an exalted plane of fatal overconfidence. You may even be able to bluff yourself into playing a better shot. All of these invaluable tricks of the trade will be explained in the pages that follow, along with the

* Gender matters. Golf is a game of few words, or should be. It is in this spirit of economy, and not out of any gender bias, that we have employed the shorter and simpler forms ‘he’, ‘him’ and ‘man’ in preference to the longer ‘he and/or she’, ‘him and/or her’ and ‘man and/or woman’. As any bluffer will tell you, egalitarianism is alive and well on the golf course. Though not necessarily in the clubhouse...

basic technical and background information about golf and its culture required for the armchair golfer to pass muster in polite society.

Will golf make you a better person? Nothing could be less certain. It may well have the opposite effect, rendering you disappointed, bitter and poorer than you might otherwise have been when you count the cost of membership subscriptions, green fees, Kevlar-reinforced rescue clubs, self-propelling electric trolleys, miracle-fibre breathable waterproofs, lost bets, hefty supplements for air travel, divorces and missed opportunities to earn an honest living. Golfers can be quite difficult, withdrawn and hard to talk to, especially before, during and after an important game – in other words, all the time.

They say golf reveals character like no other sport; ‘they’ being people who are good at golf and inclined to win. Those who are less good at the game find this so-called truth less convincing, or at least less comfortable. Golf doesn’t reveal character so much as the injustice of life, the world, everything really.

But there is an undeniable correspondence between a player’s behaviour during a golf match and his real self. Are you a bag half-full sort of golfer, or bag half-empty? Does the sight of your ball in an awkward position that could easily be improved by a discreet nudge of the toecap make you wonder if anyone is watching and think: ‘why not?’

In the end, it matters little if golf does or does not reveal character accurately. It is widely believed to do so, and it follows that the better you are perceived to be at golf, the more favourably people will look on you.

Unfortunately, becoming proficient at golf requires an investment of more time and money than most of us can justify, as well as an early start in life, as enjoyed by Tiger Woods, Rory McIlroy and other child prodigies. If you are reading this book, as opposed to having it read to you, it is almost certainly too late to take up the game with any hope of satisfaction.

So you will have to bluff. This short guide sets out to conduct you through the zones encountered in discussions about golf, and to equip you with a vocabulary and evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and methods that might even allow you to be accepted as a golfer of ability and experience. It will also give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight – without anyone discovering that, until you read it, you probably didn't know the difference between a Scargill and a Brazilian.