Why Golf Is So Important

Welcome to Enjoy-The-Walk

This column is dedicated to golf and will explore matters related to how and why golf and similar activities are important for enhancing life-long wellness and health. By way of introduction– I was an exercise physiologist at the University of Michigan, from 1973 to 2015, and an avid and dedicated golfer. My main research interests include exercise, nutrition, and weight control. I have been involved in testing and designing exercise and nutrition programs for professional and collegiate athletes, and have trained personal trainers for the last 40 years.

Today’s column will reflect on my recent experience and observations attending my 50th high-school reunion two years ago at Hollywood High School in California. That’s right, I’m a proud Hollywood High graduate, class of ’63!

We gathered on a Saturday night, some dressed in suites, some in casual attire, and some even wore their old HHS jackets, sweaters and retro early 60s outfits. Me, I wore casual cloths, but I did have under my long-sleeved shirt my vintage and prized HHS tee that occupies a special place in the bottom of a draw that has not seen the light of day for maybe 40 years. It felt good to know that I could still fit into it.

We all had little ID tags with our names and high school pictures of 50 years ago. I’m sure this was so we could recognize whom we were talking to. But the pictures were so small, and almost everyone wore glasses or had contacts, we all had to squint to first read the names, then try to quickly and correctly place the name with the photo, and then try and say something to show that you really did remember how close you were back then. Here’s my picture, if you look closely at the tag you can see some hair– it’s all gone now. Ugh! Fifty years takes its toll!
As I made my way around the room meeting and greeting as many people as I could, I was struck how many of my fellow classmates, both male and female, looked old, sick and tired, flabby or overweight, and had to sit down just to chat. “Standing hurts my feet”, “I’ve got poor circulation, got to sit down”, “You know, I’m not as young as I used to be”, “Dance, not me, haven’t danced in years”!

Can’t tell you how many times I heard those laments. Not every one of my classmates, mind you, was like that. No, there were those who seemed vibrant, young with just older features– they were ready to dance the “twist till we tear the house down” (Chubby Checker) or do the Stroll across the floor (with the Diamonds) just like we danced 50 years ago.

Difference Between the “Old” and “Young-Old” Were Obvious!

As I walked and danced (I was never, nor am I now, a good dancer, but I have fun moving around the floor) my way around the room talking with former classmates (about 75% were now retired) I discovered that those who were like me, let’s call us “the young-old” all had common characteristics like having jobs and or hobbies that included being outdoors with freedom to move and be physically active a good part of the day. We young-old folks seemed to be very social and liked be around like-mined people with similar interests. It seemed we all were involved in jobs or hobbies that involved physical activity. Lastly, we all remarked that we were passionate about we do, and we were clear that we intended to remain committed about it for years to come.

For me, I’ve just described my experience with golf. For others it might be other physically activities like fly-fishing, bowling, dancing, hiking, bird watching, yoga, walking/ jogging/ running, surfing, roller skating, ice skating, bocce ball, etc. You get the picture, these are mostly individual sports and activities that anyone can do, both young and old, that take time, practice, hard work, dedication and passion. And for those who do work at it, the results are easily seen in terms of vitality, youthful exuberance, and a real joy for living. But, it’s the things you don’t see that might surprise you.

“Golf: A Game of Life and Death”

My whole career I’ve extolled the benefits of physical activity as being vital for attaining and maintaining healthy longevity that includes a positive outlook on life. I’ve not been specific about expected health gains of particular activities, as most of this is not well researched. Not true for golf.

A growing body of literature points to the long-term beneficial health effects of golf.
In 2009, a team of researchers from the Karolinska Institute in Sweden published a remarkable study of health benefits of golf. The study, published in the Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports, was based on 300,000 Swedish golfers and showed that golf has beneficial health effects beyond what we might think. According to their data, the death rate amongst golfers is 40 per cent lower than the rest of the population, which equates to an increased life expectancy of five years. Golfers have a lower death rate regardless of sex, age and social-economic group. The lowest death rates were found in the group of golfers with the lowest handicap (i.e. the best golfers). This supports the idea that it is largely the game itself that is good for healthy longevity. Now, it is probably that playing golf also associates with healthy lifestyle practices that result in reduced mortality, such as healthy eating, low smoking prevalence, and regular check-ups. The same can be said of any life’s activities that promote healthy habits. Indeed, several previous epidemiological studies have shown that leisure-time physical activity associates with decreased illness and decreased rates of all-cause death.

**Documented Benefits of Golf**

- Lower body weight and fat – at any given age golfers weigh less their age-matched non-golfers; improved muscle strength and tone
- Reduced risk of cardio-metabolic diseases like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, high blood sugar
- Improved Social Life; having more friends
- Better balance control- fall less and suffer fewer broken bones
- Better able to control stress

**Shut-it down**

By 11 PM most of the older ones had gone home, us younger-olds danced til they told us to “shut it down” (at midnight). On the way back to the hotel I had to remind my wife to call for an early wake-up; I had an 8 AM tee time at the local golf course.

**References**


