

Deep Roots: The Royal & Ancient Game

by Wilma Heberling

Since the Scottish Society of San Antonio is seriously planning to hold a golf tourney next year (2010), I thought I would prime the pump, so to speak, with a bit about the game. Golf, as most of you know, whether you play the game or not, has been around Scotland for a very long time. The Scots claim to have invented it, but that is not altogether true. “Kolf,” as it was then termed, was a popular pastime in the 1300’s among *both* the Dutch and the Scots. In medieval times, however, the aim was at particular trees rather than to whack balls down holes. Scotland was indeed the birthplace of golf as we know it with holes on the ground as targets.

The earliest reference to Scottish golf dates back to 1457 when King James banned both golf and football (soccer) because they were taking time away from archery practice! The ban was blissfully ignored, and by the 17th century, golf was well established – one might say in full swing.

The most famous course is St Andrew’s Old Course, along the coast in Fife. It is definitely not for beginners. There are rules about handicap certificates and such, and a round will set you back around 150 British pounds – not counting caddy fees. To play a round on the Old Course, your name has to be picked out of a ballot on the morning you hope to tee off. You are better off to try your luck on one of the other numerous courses both at St. Andrew’s (5), and elsewhere around the country.

Most of the other well known courses are associated with a sea view and are known as “links,” a Scottish word meaning “a stretch of sandy, grass-covered land next to the sea.” These courses are Troon, Nairn, Muirfield, Gullane, Dornoch, and, of course, Carnoustie. As a young girl, I played ball on the Gullane links totally unaware of its claim to fame. My friends and I just knew it was great, springy grass on which to play. If you would like phenomenal scenery along with the game, take your pick from Highland courses such as Gleneagles, Loch Lomond, Pitlochry and Machrihanish.

A tradition in Scottish golfing circles is lunch at the clubhouse. This can present a problem for women in some places because there are still club houses that post signs stating “No ladies or dogs,” as does the entrance to the Royal & Ancient clubhouse in St. Andrew’s! Although there are many avid female golfers, some of whom who could take on your average man, the sport’s traditional image in Scotland of tweedy men in moustaches is hard to shake. In some club house bars women are tolerated, but they must change clothes before meeting their male companion in the bar. The men can enter spikes and all. At one clubhouse an older golfer on being told that the “men only” bar was being done away with said, “It’s not the ladies I object to, it’s the bloody women!” Thankfully, American golf is a little different. Just try keeping the women out of the clubhouse here!

Some people object to the game itself. Ever since King James banned golf in favor of archery practice, golfers have been accused of playing “a game that ruined a good walk.”

However, one famous golfer responded to that by saying, “It’s more fun to practice mind over matter than to walk in a vacuum.”

So, if you are a golf lover, and would be willing to work on the future Scottish Society of San Antonio’s golf scramble, let me know. You know how to get in touch.

[Editor's note: It was probably Scotland where the following joke originated: “When men beat the ground with sticks and cursed in medieval times, it was called sorcery. Now, it's called golf!”]