STAY-AT-HOME MANDATE AND MORE…

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To be perfectly honest, the stay-at-home mandate hasn't been terrible for me. Although I would love to get out of the house more, I have nowhere to go. So, I stay home, walk the dog, read, and in the evening, binge watch episodes of whatever. While fairly well-developed before, my "do nothing" skill set has truly risen to the occasion during this stay-at-home mandate.

The lines distinguishing my pre-COVID life from my new normal are minimal: remote working (per usual), social distancing (strangers have never flocked to me), going to the grocery store (still a bore), and FaceTime happy hours (martinis taste the same) have sustained me thus far.

This time has also allowed me to do something that no sane person would do. Each afternoon, Truman The Dog and I diligently meander the golf course to burn off energy and hunt stray golf balls. This routine began mid-January with a camouflage of snow, which made the yellow, green and pink balls easy pickings.

In the beginning, finding five or six was pretty cool. Then, as the snow melted and the grass reemerged, my fervor to find more balls became obsessive. Soon I was finding 15, then 20, and now, 40 or more on a good day. Truman's and my record haul is a humble 71. I have been dreaming about the hunt—really. It's like an Easter egg hunt for a grownup and his wannabe hunting dog.

Reality and insanity collide at this stage. After our fruitful expeditions yield a king's ransom in $4-a-pop golf balls, my nights are filled with vivid, technicolor dreams of balls peeking out from under thatches of tall grass, beaten down by the ravages of winter. Has this stay-at-home mandate infiltrated my reality? Searching for balls and more balls… have I turned into Truman? I no longer discriminate against cheap practice balls and ones with tree or scuff marks. A ball is a ball, right? Some even have gashes, which look more like smiles by the day.

Public service announcement for plant potters: crummy balls provide prime drainage in lieu of terra cotta shards. From my perspective, these

balls are free, and now, we no longer need to smash a perfectly good pot to placate another.

Not all golf balls are created equal. In the beginning, there were only white balls and competing manufacturers vied for golfers' dollars with unfounded claims that their balls go farther and straighter. Then the Day-Glo colors became fashionable—a boon to Truman's and my hunts—and now, "soft feel" balls are all the rage. One of my personal favorites is TaylorMade's "Penta Speed" ball, which claims to go five times as fast or far. Come on, really? Golf ball manufacturers now have "brand ambassadors" to market their balls. PGA pros not only get these so-called superior balls for free but also are paid lots of dollars (yours, BTW) to promote brand X.

Finding a ball with a corporate or other golf club's logo is the equivalent of finding two regular balls. Back at home base, Truman's and my bounty is washed and sorted. My son (after a 14-day quarantine) came to visit and joined us for a walk as I searched for balls. He thought I was nuts until he saw me in action. Then he knew for sure.

Anybody who plays golf knows it's a total head game. "Soft feel" balls are merely the latest trick. Golf's governing bodies, the USGA and the Royal & Ancient Golf Club[1] (R&A), have a rule[2]–#4 for those who care–that you can only have 14 clubs in your bag. A new set of clubs is an infinitely dearer investment than balls.

Imagine you are on a par 4. You take out your new (expensive) driver, and with any luck, your brand-new $4 ball goes 270+ yards down the middle of the fairway. As you approach *your* second shot, thoughts of glory interrupted by uncertainty begin relentlessly playing in *your* head – should I use a fairway wood? Am I feeling strong and confident? The sun is out, and it's a perfect day. Maybe a 5 iron and lay up just before the green. What about a 6 iron? Remember that shot the other day?

Here's my point. I don't think you need all of those clubs to score well. In fact, most players could use three or four clubs and score pretty well as long as they don't snag a look at the bag and think they ought to use their neglected clubs. My favorite is the 5 iron. My easiest pars have been playing with just that one club. The old weekend bag with a few clubs is all anyone but a pro needs, but clubs are sold as complete sets…so therein lies a problem. I suppose you could buy individual clubs, but retailers and certainly clubs don't make that possibility obvious.

Now, back to the hunt. The annual burn of the tall grasses in the savannahs that line many of the holes and act as ball magnets hampered a recent hunt. Truman and I raced about trying to get to fertile ball areas before the grounds crew arrived with their torches. We still found 20 balls plus a bunch for the pots. (Hint: you have to hit the ball off course regularly to know where to look.) A brown barbecued ball isn't much of a trophy.

Now with the ball hunting season more or less finished, the stay-at-home mandate still in place, and the weather becoming sit-outside-nice, it's time to practice making Azaleas[3], the drink of The Masters. And, to sort my king's ransom by make, grade, type and figure out pretty precisely how much money people left on the course.

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[1] The Royal & Ancient Golf Club was found in St. Andrews Scotland on May 14, 1754
[2] https://www.randa.org/en/rog/2019/pages/the-rules-of-golf
[3] https://video.golfdigest.com/watch/how-to-make-the-famous-masters-azalea-cocktail