

Non-golfer becomes a believer

Moving Grays Harbor

By Maryann Welch

As a non-golfer, my sentiment has always been, “there’s exercise and then there’s golf.” Many of you readers may share this opinion with me and as a result, like me, have stayed away from golf courses. Golfing seemed slow and demanded a significant time commitment. My approach to exercise has been to get as much intensity as I could out of my time. What I did know of golf just didn’t fit for me, or so I thought.

Recently husband Jim let me know that he is interested in being more physically active. However, Jim has no interest in “exercise for exercise sake”. To suit him activity must have a purpose: Riding a bicycle to a destination; exploring new waterways by kayak; or hiking/walking on a new trail or route. These have all been recent additions for Jim and the bonus has been that these are activities we can enjoy together.

Jim has dabbled in golf (that’s putting it strongly) in the past so we decided to give it try. Knowing that I would not be able to even hit the ball, I started by taking a lesson from Rich Walker, the pro at Oaksridge Golf Course in Elma. The one-hour lesson was instructive but not strenuous - although it did begin to reveal the use of a wide range of muscles and body parts.

On a beautiful early afternoon Jim and I met at Highlands Golf Course in Cosmopolis for my inaugural 9-hole round. Earlier research and common

sense led to a choice of carrying our clubs over use of a cart.

After completing nine holes – I would not let Jim keep score – I became a believer in golf as a sport and as a good source of exercise. Since I began contemplating an attempt at golf I had spoken with many golfers who all assured me of this conclusion – you were all right!

Shouldering the bag and swinging the clubs adds up to a lot of upper body work. All that walking, especially at hilly Highlands, and searching for balls lost in the rough meant plenty of weight-bearing exercise. Bending, squatting, and twisting made for a total body workout. Some reading had revealed that playing nine holes equals walking about 2 ½ miles, although that would be in a straight line and my game was anything but! More research told me that Jim and I burned over 700 calories. Not bad for an enjoyable afternoon in the outdoors with my spouse!

A recent study performed in Sweden concluded that golf can be “a good investment for health.” The death rate for golfers in the study proved to be 40 percent lower than for other people of the same sex and age. This equates to a 5-year gain in life expectancy. Longer living through golf!

I generally like to focus on sufficient aerobic exercise in my week and assumed golf would not count. A web search brought to light another Swedish study stating “Golf (walking) for middle-aged individuals is exercise at a low to moderate intensity and long duration which may increase or maintain aerobic fitness and improve health.” That research further concluded that “a hilly course puts a higher strain on the aerobic capacity than a flat course.”

Many golfers are realizing that no matter what high-tech golf equipment they own, the most important piece of equipment needed to enjoy the game and play longer is their own body.

There are innumerable web sites, books and magazines that tout exercise programs tailored to improving golf games. The overall theme is that strength and stretching exercises will allow golfers to improve their game, enjoy it more, and reduce the risk of injury.

One study concluded that “a regimen of strength training and stretching helped participants drop fat weight, control blood pressure, improve flexibility, and actually increased their club-head speed by over 5 miles per hour.” For dedicated golfers looking for the key to a better game, it appears that showing up to the tee in fit condition may be the answer.

There are even Pilates-based golf workouts, which means my dedication to Pilates may pay off on the golf course. Yes, Jim and I have agreed to add golf to our physical activity repertoire – after a few more lessons for both of us. We hope to enjoy many more hours in the great outdoors chasing a little white ball while taking care of our health at the same time.

If you're like me and have shied away from this sport, I encourage you to give it a whirl at one of the many golf courses in our area. For you already-dedicated golfers, I hope this column has given you the excuse you've always needed to play more – for the health of it!

Maryann Welch is a life-long harborite, the retired director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and Social Services Department, and an avid exercise enthusiast.

If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.ghphss.org.