Portail de l'éducation de Historica Canada

Golf

Overview

This lesson plan is based on viewing the Footprints videos for George Seymour Lyon, Marlene Stewart-Streit, Moe Norman,Sandra Post, and George Knudson. Canada, it has been said, is Scotland's revenge on England. Scottish immigrants formed the backbone of the nation's fur trade more than 200 years ago and our first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald was also Scottish. Yet we have tended to forget the diversity of our earlier immigrants and the variety of our sporting history. Golf has a long history in this country, and this, at the very least, we owe to the Scots.

Aims

To increase student awareness of the origins of the game of golf; to increase student consciousness of the history of Canadian success in golf; to increase student appreciation for the trailblazers of golf in Canada; to examine their accomplishments in their historical context; to explore how Canadian golfers have defined themselves on the international stage; and, to critically investigate the exclusivity of the sport over the course of its modern history.

Background

In 1826, the *Montreal Herald* ran a notice:

To Scotsmen. A few true sons of Scotia, eager to perpetuate the remembrance of her Customs have fixed upon the 25th December and the 1st January, for going to the Priests' Farm, to PLAY AT GOLF. Such of their Countrymen as choose to join them, will meet them before TEN O'Clock, A.M., at D.M'Arthur's INN, Hay-Market. Steps have been taken to have CLUBS provided.

This notice is the first mention of golf found in print in Canada, and though there is no record of how many Scots showed up at Priests' Farm, they immigrated in droves during the 1870s and 1880s to the young Dominion of Canada. One of these relocated Scots, Alexander Dennistoun from Peterborough, Ontario, migrated to Montréal. There, in the autumn of 1873, he gathered seven of his fellow expatriates and local businessmen to establish the first club in North America, the Royal Montréal Golf Club.

By the 1880s, the gutta-percha ball, or “gutty” as it was popularly known, was the latest in golf ball technology. The gutty was molded from Malaysian tree gum, an elastic material that could be reshaped after immersion in hot water. Discovering that a rough surface gave the ball a longerand straighter flight, ball-makers began indenting the surface with hundreds of small “dimples.” Eventually, gutties were imported from Scotland, as the market in Canada was too small to justify local manufacture.

Besides providing for longer flight, the new gutta-percha ball also

demanded a stronger club with a thick grip. This would lead to the manufacture of iron-headed clubs that supplemented the wooden-headed clubs that, until that point, were used in all parts of the course.

In the 1890s, the game of golf followed the railroad westward, and clubs began to appear in every province and territory. Immigration, urbanization, and middle-class leisure time also facilitated the spread of the game. While not universally supported, this period also saw the admission of women into the sport. In fact, in 1892, the first Ladies Section in Canada was formed at the Royal Montréal Golf Club.

In 1898, an American dentist, Dr. Coburn Haskell, invented the rubber-cored wound ball. This design involved winding India-rubber thread around a solid rubber core. The new ball put pressure on clubs to improve their courses with longer fairways, more bunkers and holes. And even while the Haskell ball was not generally available in Canada until about 1903, it soon brought changes to courses across the nation.

By 1904, golf had become an official sport at the Olympic Games in St. Louis. During the competition, 46-year old Torontonian George Seymour Lyon, hit the ball with an enthusiasm which rode the line between courageous play and plain foolhardiness. Long before the Games, Lyon had been accused of playing championship golf by defying all the principles of the game. In fact, his style was described as a cross between raking hay and a butcher killing a steer. Despite his unprecedented and unconventional style, a 15 August 1926 Maclean’s article described him as “certainly more than Canada’s greatest golfer. He is the high priest of Canadian golf."

Born on 27 July 1858 in Richmond, Ontario, George Lyon did not take up the game until he was 38 years old. Though his Scottish and Irish lineage

suggested an affinity for the sport, Lyon's granddaughter recalls how he considered golf “a wimpy game.” She went on: “People stood there and hit the ball, then walked a bit and hit it again. And I think he felt it wasn't a go-go game.” Indeed, in a newspaper column he admitted such: “I had a sort of contempt for the game, though I had never played it... I remember I drove a fairly good ball... I cared little for what was called the short game... Like all other beginners, I caught the fever then and there.”

He picked up a golf club for the first time after finishing a cricket match at the Rosedale ground, leaping a fence to the neighbouring golf course to try out the sport. Shortly after this beginning, Lyon quickly proceeded to become an internationally known wizard of the links, winning eight Canadian Amateur Championships between 1898 and 1914, along with his first of six consecutive Senior Golf Championships in 1918.

At the 1904 Olympic Games, Lyon's performance was unlike any golfing feat seen to that point. It was a marathon drive to the clubhouse, but when Lyon did make his final putt, he was atop the golfing world. To get there had taken a week of competition. It began on a Monday when eighty-seven golfers stepped out for the qualifying round that eliminated all but thirty-two men. Each day for the remainder of the week, Lyon played thirty-six holes against an opponent. In round after round of match play Lyon beat his opponents and by week's end, only Lyon and American amateur champion Chandler Egan remained. In the final round the 46-year-old beat the 20-year-old Egan and then proceeded to walk the entire length of the clubhouse on his hands. Such were the eccentricities of the man from Toronto.

Later, Lyon would sum up his Olympic victory with characteristic humour and humility in an interview with the Toronto Star: “Now I'd just like to say that, though the winning of this trophy carries with it the title of Champion

of the World, I am not foolish enough to think that I am the best player in the world, but I am satisfied that I am not the worst."

In reality, even years later, as a septuagenarian, Lyon was still far from the worst. In 1930, at the age of 72, Lyon won his 10th, and final, Canadian Senior Championship. But the glory would not end there; even at 76 he shot a hole in one. On 11 May 1938, Lyon died at the age of 79. Today's golfers can pay homage to the 'grand old man of the game' as his gravestone is at Plot 20, Section 27, Lot 10 of Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Toronto.

Still, perhaps the best way to remember Lyon is to practice a round with a selection of clubs that includes a driver, a brassie, a spoon, a baffy, a mashie and a niblick. Until the early 1950s, these were the sorts of individual names assigned to each club. While today's sets of clubs may include a five or six wood, or similar numbered irons, in the first half of the last century, clubs went by names like the lofter (i.e., a sand-iron), the cleek, and the rutter.

By the time Marlene Stewart-Streit began toting golf bags at the Lookout Point Golf Club in Fonthill, Ontario, at the age of twelve, baffies or niblicks were a distant memory. Born on 9 March 1934 in Cereal, Alberta, Stewart-Streit's family moved east when she was young. At her local golf course she caddied for older players, chasing stray balls for the club professional in exchange for the chance to drive a few balls herself. As a caddie, she was allowed to play one round a week on her own. By 15, she had saved up enough (caddies could make a dollar a round carrying bags) for her own clubs, soon realizing that whether using them for a 200-yard drive or a six-inch putt, concentration was necessary for victory.

Ultimately, the five foot, four kilogram Stewart would develop nerves of

iron, not to mention a steely willpower. By 1951, at the age of 17, she played a famous round against Ada Mackenzie, the pioneer of women's golf in Canada. Following the match, Mackenzie had nothing but praise: "Let me tell you, that young girl doesn't panic." She added, "You'll be hearing from her for a long time."

By 1956, Stewart was unstoppable on the links – winning the North & South Women's Amateur Championship, the US intercollegiate, the Ontario Amateur, the Canadian Close, the Canadian Open, and the Jasper Park Totem Pole. In September of that same year, she played at the Meridian Hills Country club in Indianapolis, Indiana for the US Women's National Golf championship. What began with 105 competitors ended with two in a final 36-hole match-play round. With twelve holes to go, Steward racked up a four-hole deficit against 17-year-old American JoAnne Gunderson. But with the composure Ada Mackenzie saw five years previously, Stewart rallied. When she sunk the ball in an 11 1/2 foot putt on the 35th hole, her walk to the clubhouse and the US Women's National Golf title were assured.

Since that victory, Steward-Streit's place in the pantheon of women's golf has been assured. She is the only golfer to have won the Canadian, United States, British, and Australian amateur championships. Beyond this, she captured eleven Canadian Ladies Open championships during her career, and in January 1999 Golf World Magazine voted her one of the ten top international golfers. Five years later, in 2004, she was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in St. Augustine, Florida – a first for a Canadian. Hopefully, unlike Lyon's gold medal at the 1904 Olympics in St. Louis, it will not be the only one of the century.

If Marlene Stewart-Streit was known for her focus, Moe Norman (often called the King of Swing and the Glenn Gould of Golf) is recognized by

many as the greatest golfer who ever lived. A man who stood apart from the elite sport of golf, Norman succeeded at the game, while shunning the sporting world itself. In a sport where the fans are also millionaires, Norman has had to live out of the back seat of his car, struggling to survive.

Born Murray Irwin Norman on 10 July 1929 in Kitchener, Ontario, Moe was raised within sight of the factories where his father worked. He was an outsider from the beginning and his unique swing was the product of this ostracism. At the age of twelve, he purchased a golf club on a 10-cents-a-week installment plan.

With that first club he developed a grip and posture that led to the nickname "Pipeline Moe" for its infallible accuracy. Norman's swing was an aberration on the course – an unorthodox movement that is almost comically abnormal. But when Norman contacts the ball, it goes straight, every time. Nonetheless, the self-taught genius with the singular swing was a loner in the clubhouse. Norman refused to abide by the social mores of the rarefied atmosphere of golf. The way he addressed the ball was abnormal as was the way he avoided the accolades of success. When Norman won the Canadian Amateur Golf Championship in Calgary in 1955, for instance, he hid in the bushes by the Elbow River when the championship trophy was awarded. Rather than giving a speech, Norman shrunk in fear, unable to bear the thought of people looking at him. In 1959, his foray into the PGA Tour was aborted in mid-year when another golfer complained about his unconventional attire. The man with the crooked swing, repeatable under any amount of pressure, was crippled by the strain of public attention. Striking out in anger, the Royal Canadian Golf Association increasingly shunned Norman, and in response, Norman's rage increased.

Some have argued that a boyhood accident had left him with what doctors now think was brain damage. Debilitated by shyness, from the 1950s through to the 1980s Norman still won numerous tournaments and broke thirty course records in Canada, shooting 59 (on a par 72) several times.

Today Canadian golfers from Mike Weir to Lorie Kane and old pros from Lee Trevino, Nick Price, and Tom Watson are unanimous in their admiration of Moe Norman. No one has ever been able to strike the ball like Norman, and only recently, with the support of his closest friends, has golf begun to accept his brilliance. Terrified and humiliated by the country club set for years, perhaps the long-lasting outsider will finally be included among the legends of the game.

In 1968, Kathy Whitworth recorded ten wins on the LPGA Tour and was the leading money winner with $48,379. But in the LPGA Championship she met her match in twenty year old Canadian rookie Sandra Post. After victories in three successive Canadian Junior Girl's Championships, the Oakville, Ontario native drove headlong into the professional circuit with her win over Whitworth. It was the first win for a Canadian at a major professional golf tournament, and she became the youngest winner of a modern major.

More than a decade after her debut, Post's career peaked. She won back-to-back wins at the 1978 and 1979 Dinah Shore and finished second on the LPGA money list in 1979. Finally, after sixteen years on the tour, Post retired. She won a total of nine events, including three majors and also had twenty second-place finishes, including one at the U.S. Women's Open.

Today, Post is helping others with the game, teaching at her own golf

school and supplying commentary for CTV, TSN, ABC and ESPN. Her most important advice to new golfers is not how to swing the club or position the feet, but not to expect too much too soon. "It's going to be frustrating but you have the rest of your life to learn the game," she explains, which is sage advice from a golfer who was first introduced to the game at the rather tender age of five.

Winnipeg native George Knudson seemed to master his swing early. The problem, however, was always with Knudson's putter. For instance, after playing against Knudson on a number of occasions, golf-legend Jack Nicklaus suggested that the Canadian had "a million dollar swing and a 10-cent putter." But what a swing it was.

As a youth growing up in Winnipeg Knudson practiced with an intensity that sometimes left his hands so raw he could not compete. Lacking the physical size of a natural long-ball hitter, Knudson became a technician of the sport. So much so in fact, that on the PGA Tour (eight victories, $527,371 earned) fellow golfers would pause to watch the Canadian's swing. But the golf swing is as ephemeral and fleeting as a ghost, the feeling of which the master of the swing says he felt only once:

"It was in Tokyo in 1966, a five iron shot that I wanted to move from right to left, with the wind blowing left to right. When I put the swing on it, I knew it was perfect. It was something I had worked towards all my life. My whole body felt like it was going to explode. That was the full bolt. I've hit one perfect shot in my life, and that’s one more than most."

While few would argue with the latter claim, any one who had the privilege to see Knudson, who died on 24 January 1989 at the age of 51 from lung cancer, would vehemently disagree with the former.

The fairways and greens of golf have changed much since that 1826 Montreal Herald request for players. What has also changed is the face of golf. No longer a game for the elite (though there are still courses that exclude players based on gender), peoples from all over the world have joined with the Scots for a long walk down the links.

Activities

1. Local Links

Who better to design a golf course than the people who negotiate their traps and holes for a living? Not surprisingly, then, many golf professionals also design what Mark Twain called "a nice walk spoiled." One of the most celebrated and most prolific architects of golf, Stanley Thompson, designed 80 Canadian golf courses from Nova Scotia to British Columbia between 1921 and 1949. The courses at Jasper Park and Banff Springs in the Canadian Rockies are two of his most famous projects. Albert Murray is another architect. He won the Canadian Open in 1908 and 1913, and laid out more than thirty golf courses, mostly in Québec.

Students are to design their own 18-hole golf course for their local community. After selecting a specific location, students should lay out a course that includes the major components of a professional golf course. Distribute a list of the Design Standards (below) and review in class. This should help focus students and give parameters to their proposals. Designs should take advantage of the natural or artificial environment of the community. For example, a river may offer a challenging hazard. Alternatively, a building could serve as a trap.

Design Standards

The following are the design standards that your proposal should meet:

- Safe for both players and non-players
- Serve not only beginners but players with advanced skills
- Well balanced course with a wide range of hole lengths and a good mixture of holes requiring left, right and straight throws
- Utilize elevation changes and available foliage as well as possible
- Hole lengths should be between a minimum of 35 metres and a maximum of 300 metres.
- Any well-marked object, post or basket can serve as a target
- Total par should range from about 68-75 on an 18-hole course. Many holes should be par 4s. A hole up to 60m is at least a par 3; from 60-85m is a par 4; from 85-125m is a par 5. (Add 1 to par for every additional 45m if needed.) Adjust par on a hole according to hazards.

2. Technology of the Game

In groups of two or three, students are to research the development of golfing equipment. Next, groups are to plot the development with illustrations and explanations on a timeline. It is up to each group where their timeline begins.

Finally, students are to predict what future inventions may change the course of golf.

3. No Men Allowed

When Marlene Stewart-Streit competed in the US Women's National Golf

championship in September of 1956, she was one of 105 competitors. Included in the field was Ann Gregory, the first-ever African-American female competitor in the history of the tournament. Almost a half century later, when Steit was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame, she was joined by three other entries. Charlie Sifford was one of them. Raised in Charlotte, North Carolina, he was instrumental in breaking the race barrier in professional golf when he became the first African-American to play full-time on the PGA Tour in 1961. Perhaps Tiger Woods is the embodiment of how golf clubs have shed their exclusivity. Nonetheless, Woods, a champion against exclusionary policies for reasons of ethnicity straddled-the-fence when questioned about some courses that bar people according to race and gender.

Muirfield Golf Course in Scotland is regarded as one of the bastions of exclusivity in golf. Prior to competing in the 2002 British Open at Muirfield, Woods was asked about its restrictive policies. His answer was as follows:

"They're entitled to set up their own rules the way they want them. It would be nice to see everyone have an equal chance to participate if they wanted to but there is nothing you can do about it. If you have a group, an organization, and that's the way they want to set it up, then that's their prerogative. These are things that have happened and will continue to occur and to exist for a long period of time. It would be nice to see every golf course open to everyone who wanted to participate but that's just not where society is."

Woods added he would feel the same way even if the Muirfield restrictions applied to other groups such as Asians or African-Americans rather than women.

Students are to write a 250-word letter to the editor of their local newspaper. The letter should argue for the exclusivity in a golf club based on either gender or ethnicity. But in a role reversal, either men or people who are white are not to be allowed onto the course. The piece should be satirical, thereby revealing the injustice of the exclusivity of today's courses.

4. Environment and the Course

Environmentalists often deride golf courses for the artificial environments they create at the expense of nature.

In groups of two or three, students are to visit a local golf course and determine how the course can leave less of a "footprint" on the natural environment. Finally, each group is to create a list of recommendations for the course, suggesting what could be done to make the course more "environmentally friendly."

5. Moe-isms

Moe Norman is known for his concise statements about the game of golf. The following are a few "Moe-isms:"

On hitting the golf ball:

"Why hit hooks and slices? You hurt your muscles with all that twisting. I've hit five million balls and never had a sore muscle. I can stand here all day."
"What's wrong with hitting the ball straight? Why hook it out of bounds or slice it into the rough? Hit the ball straight. There's no thorn bushes up your butt [in the fairway]."

"[Ben] Hogan was next after me. But I got mad at him once. When he said the only straight ball is an accident, I told him to come with me and you'll see a lot of accidents!"

On practicing:

"Practice something that makes you better. Don't do something that ingrains habits that make you worse. But that's what 99 percent of the people do."
"Everybody asks themselves [after a round] what did I do wrong? I say, 'What did I do right?' That's what I want to learn – what I did right."

On the golf swing:

"Why am I the greatest ball-striker? Because I have the least moving parts. I keep it simple."
"Be technique oriented, not distance oriented."
"Stay within yourself. I never swing 100 percent. Most of the time, it's 80 percent. Sure, you can swing 100 percent and the ball will go further, but it's work. Swing easy. Golf isn't a game of violence. Just bump it – about 280 [yards]."

On the mental side of golf:

"Be your own best friend. Have a good attitude. Don't let the game eat you – you eat the game. When you step up to the tee, be glad you're up. Don't be afraid."
"Golf isn't supposed to be work. It's to have fun. So have fun!"
"I never got mad at myself. Why? Because getting mad only makes you swing worse."
"Golf is easy. People make it hard."

After discussing the above, students are to write their own "Moe-isms". The theme of their advice should be based on an issue about which they feel specifically knowledgeable. After constructing their own list, each student is to present their suggestions to the rest of the class. Like Moe Norman's suggestions, humour should be used to identify a larger truth.

Resources

Footprint Videos

George Seymour Lyon
Marlene Stewart-Streit
Moe Norman
Sandra Post
George Knudson

The Canadian Encyclopedia

Canadian Golf Hall of Fame and Museum
Golf
George Knudson
George Seymour Lyon
Sandra Post
Marlene Stewart Streit

Barclay, J.A. Golf in Canada, A History. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart: 1992.

Best, David. Canada: Our Century In Sport. Markham, Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002.

Platts. Mitchell. The Illustrated History of Golf. New York: Gramercy Books, 2000.

Post, Sandra and Loral Dean. Sandra Post and me. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998.

Sidorsky, Robert. Golf's Greatest Moments. New York: Harry N Abrams, 2003.

Stewart, W. Lyn and David R. Gray. The Implements of Golf: A Canadian Perspective. Canadian Museum of Civilization, Mercury Series, History Division, Paper 49: 2001.