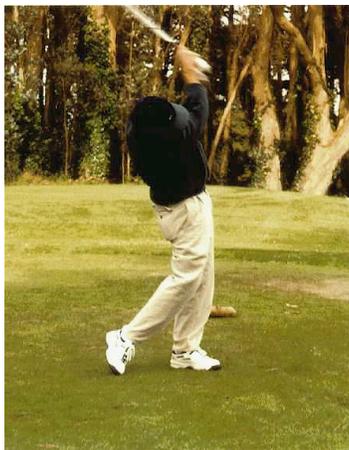


## MY LIFE IN GOLF – Thoughts and Recollections by Ron Brown

First, this title is horribly misleading. My life is not *in* golf. That is, you are not reading about the best golfer you have never heard of or anything like that. (Of course, you are not reading about the worst golfer you have never heard of, either.) What this short essay is about is just ... the game ... and the role it has played in one person's life and how the game has changed and why it is so enduring – all from my perspective after the nearly seventy years I've been swinging a club. Well, even that isn't right – just because for nearly half of that time, I didn't swing a club at all (real life took over) – but more on that later.



I grew up with golf. It was my dad's passion. It wasn't that he was a great golfer (although I didn't know it when I was growing up because of all the club trophies on our mantle) or even that he played a lot (a luxury we couldn't afford). But it is probably all he thought about when he wasn't working as a metal worker/machinist trying to feed and educate a family of five during the war years and beyond. It was from him that I heard stories about Jones, Nelson, Hagen, Sarazen, Snead, and, of course, Hogan (who was his hero, I think it's safe to say). And it is because of him that I started with my first (and only, as it happens) golf lessons. I was probably about six. The free Saturday morning golf clinic was at the Presidio Hills Golf Course – a pitch and putt in San Diego – with Al and Don Abrego, the father and son club pros at that somewhat historic little 3-par course in Presidio Park. My dad had made my clubs by cutting down the hickory shafts and machining the blade heads to fit. I'm sure I was pretty dreadful. There was a tournament at the end of the summer clinic. I think I scored 108 on that pitch and putt - twice par, if I recall correctly.

My first time on a real golf course was as a spectator – at the San Diego Amateur Championships at the old Mission Valley Country Club, later Stardust Country Club, and now the Riverwalk Club. The occasion, I was seven, was to watch the great local phenom Gene Littler (then 17) play for the championship – one of his many. My only memory of that day was walking down a fairway paying no attention at all and being gently nudged aside by young Littler as I nearly stepped on his ball! I doubt if he remembers.

My first competition in which I actually won something (hmmm ... maybe the only one), was when I was twelve. My dad used to take me to the annual Hole-in-One contest at the Balboa Park Municipal Course. He always entered – and when he thought I was ready, he entered me. So there I was, in front of all those people, trying to hit two shots across a canyon to a small green on the opposite hillside. To hit the green, one had to carry the narrow canyon – running a shot onto the surface wasn't possible. I have no idea how far it was – maybe a little over a hundred yards or so, thinking back – but I know I hit a five iron. My first shot wasn't bad – nearly made it across. So with great anticipation, I teed up the second ball, addressed it, and ... oh, no, bumped the ball off the tee before beginning my swing, watched with horror as it rolled off the rubber tee-mat and down the hill into the canyon, and tried to be nonchalant walking away to the laughter of the crowd. Then the starter gave me another ball and said to try it again (after all, my blunder wouldn't have counted on a golf course, either, since it was not a stroke with the intent of striking the ball!). I think I had rather he would have just let it go. But, bravely, I returned to the tee – and this caught the attention of the whole crowd. Oh, great – now everyone was watching! My next shot flew to the green – and stopped 4 feet 2 inches from the cup. I still have the trophy. Somewhere.

San Diego was a good place to grow up playing golf. With golf courses everywhere (even then), a very active junior golf program, and three-dollar greens fees at the Balboa Park muni course for juniors, it was an accessible sport for someone who wasn't particularly good at sports. Of course, I wasn't particularly good at golf either – but the only people who knew that were the other golfers. I *liked* the game – it was what I did and it was my connection to my father. And it didn't matter that I was never in contention in any junior golf tournament in any age division over those years. I was somehow a part of the sport – and I knew (sort of) the other great junior players of the time in San Diego even though I was no threat to them. None-the-less, I had the distinction of being the best golfer in my junior high school (all the good young players were at places like La Jolla and Chula Vista) and eventually played on the high school team as well. And, as a golfer, being socially inept was not an

issue – no junior or senior high school girl would ever pay much attention to someone on the golf team anyway. The PGA came to San Diego each year – and it was at those tournaments that I saw players like Billy Casper, Tommy Bolt, Julius Boros, Jimmy Demeret, Dr. Cary Middlecoff, of course Gene Littler (my favorite), young Arnold Palmer with that wonderfully aggressive style of his, and many others - including the great local major champion Paul Runyon, or “Little Poison” as he was called. My dad made a special point of having me watch Charlie Sifford – the first black man to play in a tour event at the time, and that only by special dispensation.

I first broke 80 in a high school match on the last round of my sophomore-year season – well over a half-century ago, which was also my last day as a fifteen year old. (I had secretly hoped to break that scoring barrier before I turned 16, but never told anyone and wasn't really sure that I would.) My school – Hoover High – was playing La Jolla High, the perennial city champions. They were good – the great Phil Rodgers had shot a 65 against us at La Jolla Country Club earlier in the season. For some reason, he was not playing that day. I had drawn Chuck Courtney, also a sophomore, as my opponent in that match play event at Mission Valley C.C. – the site of the PGA San Diego Opens at the time. He was having an off day – and I my personal best to win 1-up. I could hardly wait to get home to tell about my round – but my family was at some event (rare for them), and I ate dinner alone.

Don't get me wrong – I wasn't particularly good as a high school player either, other than for an occasional round. I talked a much better golf game than I played. *Our* best player was Carl Welty – the now-honored Top 100 golf instructor who made golf his life by teaching the pros. It was clear early on that golf would not be my vocation – I wouldn't become a tour player as did Rodgers or Courtney or an instructor as did Welty. Oh, sure, I did play college golf – at one of the small campuses in the UC system. I even saw Courtney occasionally in competition again (on his way to All-American status at San Diego State before joining the PGA tour) – although we were never matched against each other again (thankfully). Al Geiberger was another of the collegiate stars in Southern California at that time – and we kept hearing stories about a burly long hitting U. S. Amateur and N.C.A.A champion from Ohio State named Jack Nicklaus, or something like that. But golf was how I had fun in college – a way to be part of collegiate sports without any real pressure (or, at the time, needed athleticism!) It was an excuse to be on a golf course and not in the library or lab as an undergraduate. It was a very low key varsity sport - our university support was two new Titleists for each match or tournament. We were supposed to practice some when we got the chance. Times have changed in collegiate golf.

My parents bought a home in a development near the Pete Dye designed Carlton Oaks Country Club in Santee just east of San Diego when it was first being built during my sophomore year of college. (I would occasionally walk the course when it was under construction imagining what it would be like to play.) My dad and I shared a promotional family membership when it opened just after my college graduation – for about \$25 per month, I think it was – so he could play whenever he wanted after retiring and I could as well when I was home from grad school. I scored the first eagle on that brand new course – nailed a two-wood second shot on the first five-par to within fifteen feet and holed the putt. One of my best ball striking days on a golf course back then was when I played four over par for 36 holes at Carlton Oaks while missing a half-dozen 3-4 foot putts! It was hard for me to play just a casual round of golf after graduating and leaving competition behind. Playing golf with my dad or uncle or friends would usually leave me in a private match play competition with myself – playing against my most recent round. The goal was to win more of those matches than I lost – meaning I was continuing to improve. In graduate school, my occasional round when I had the time was usually with the coaches – they were always fun to beat since they are, by nature, such competitive people. And although our golf coach talked about him, I never got the chance to meet young Gary McCord (ultimately a two-time All-America and tour player and now a TV commentator) when he arrived on campus - by then, finishing my dissertation was more important than playing golf. Just as well for my ego we never played.

Then real life took over – and finishing my graduate studies, building an academic career, raising a son, and living a real life left no time for golf – and the clubs went away. For nearly thirty-five years!



But golf has an interesting way of staying with you. And when my son – by this time grown and starting to play with friends - gave me a Christmas present of greens fees at the Presidio Club in San Francisco in 2000, knowing I had not swung a club in decades, yet and he wanted to play with his dad, it was time to get my old clubs out, clean them up, and see if there was any kind of a swing left. (I parred the first hole on the local short course on my first round after all that time.) But that round with my son at the Presidio (I probably shot in the mid-nineties!) is what renewed my interest in playing again. And it wasn't without some trepidation – would I be okay just being another guy trying to break ninety? After a year playing a few occasional rounds with my old clubs, everyone said I really should replace them (purchased as a present to myself for completing my doctorate thirty-some years earlier) with then-current technology. My persimmon headed woods (you know *woods* – named for the material they were actually made of!) were no longer in fashion. If I was really going to try to play this game, I should be reinventing my golf swing with current equipment. And had things ever changed! I didn't even recognize the manufacturers – Ping, Cleveland, Callaway, Orlimar, Cobra (what happened to McGregor and Spalding?). And although I was willing to go with new clubs, I certainly couldn't see myself with the odd-looking oversized club heads. So I bought a new set of Clevelands - both irons and woods - with graphite shafts and set out to try to learn to play golf again. That was in 2001.

So, how has it been relearning the game? Well, for one, the game has changed. A lot. And all those changes have made it possible for someone my age to pick up the game again and continue playing – in many ways as well or better than as a younger player. There is no question that the equipment is better. The balls are better – fly longer and straighter and spin less off the tee and yet more on short shots to create more control around the greens, and are so much more durable. And cavity-back irons with graphite shafts are much more forgiving – and longer hitting – than the steel-shafted chrome-plated steel blades I used four decades earlier. And after only five years hitting metal “woods”, I replaced them with a new set (yes, including a 460 cc titanium driver!) with the latest micro-laminated graphite shafts. (Technology can't fix a poor swing, of course – but it can certainly reward a decent one by keeping the club head square with torsion resistant shafts and that large polar moment of inertia head with the big titanium driver face!) And my 3-iron, which I could hit pretty well given the right conditions, was replaced by a hybrid – longer, more forgiving, and more controllable. I can now shape shots, which I could never do with the long iron – even from the short rough. So in my late sixties, I hit the ball farther and straighter off the tee – and more consistently – than when I was in my twenties. In what other sport can *that* happen? The courses have changed as well. Just the addition of course markers, so that one can always know the yardage to the center of the green, has been a huge change. Part of the game used to be estimating those distances and being aware of pin placements by looking ahead rather than just reading the yardage markers and noticing the color of the flag or checking the pin placement chart or looking at a GPS or laser rangefinder! Even the sounds have changed – gone are the click of metal spikes on sidewalks and cart paths and the wonderful muffled *whump* of a persimmon driver striking the ball “on the screws”. And the swing has changed as well – a flatter swing plane with a stable rotation axis, full shoulder turn over a relatively quiet lower body, and balanced, upright finish replacing the classic “reverse-C” high-finish follow-through. (Well, it hasn't really changed a lot from how Hogan articulated it in his *Five Lessons on the Modern Fundamentals* book of fifty years ago – but has changed from the way most golfers actually swung the club at the time.)

What has *not* changed is that it is still a game of hope (so very often followed by disappointment, as it happens). Every shot is taken with great anticipation – and then, well ..... Of course, teeing up a new ball on the first hole is really a symbol of that hope – it has such promise, it could be the start of a very special day, that personal best round! And every single shot – every single putt – carries so much hope with it as well. Oh, sure, we know it really is the smoothness and tempo of the swing that will yield the result we want – but there is so much hope in there as well. A bad day is made right with one great shot or great hole – and that carries over until the next round with the hope that it can be repeated (while fixing the shots and holes that weren't so good, it is always hoped). And the above doesn't just apply to you and me, either – watch the pros sometime, and the looks of anticipation on *their* faces when the ball is in the air – and so often the disappointment when it comes down. Of course, what *we* think are great shots are often not as they had planned them – and their disappointment shows. And, of course, the multi-billion dollar golf equipment industry is fueled by hope – as well as hype. One more purchase will surely make us better – a new driver, different putter, another wedge, practice aides, teaching videos, ..... And aren't the crowds at the driving range driven by the hope that practice makes perfect – rather than merely permanent?

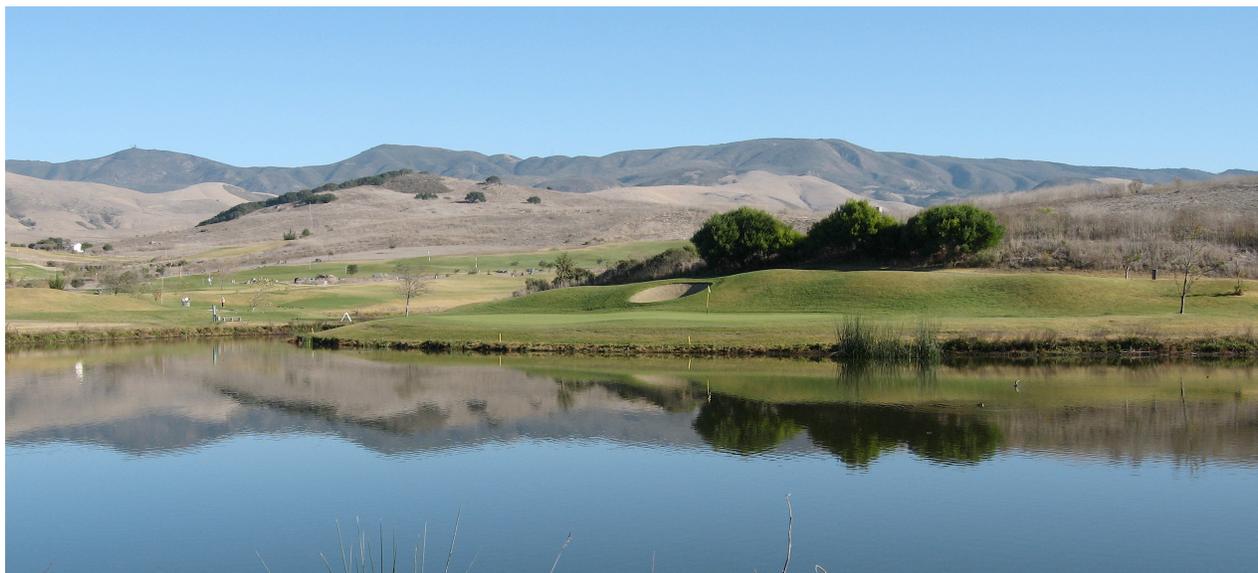
When I first started playing again after well over three decades away from the game, I just wanted to hit some good shots and occasionally have good holes – some pars and maybe a birdie opportunity occasionally – and at least get good enough to be able to enjoy it. As I have gotten my game back, I've learned to place tee shots, play to avoid disaster holes even after missed shots (most of the time!), look for opportunities to score, and occasionally have a string of very good shots and very good holes – and maybe even a very good nine. My game has finally gotten to the point that recovering from poor shots and at least saving a bogey is usually a possibility, as has following a couple of poor holes with some good ones to save a round. The last several years has allowed me to play a lot – more than I have ever played before – and my game has continued to improve. And I never thought I would be at that level again.

Do I score as well as I did when I was young and playing “competitively”? It took only two or three years (playing once or twice a month) before I was scoring in the low-to-mid 80s with an occasional round in the high-seventies. And now, after a number of years of playing a lot more, I play better and score better than when I was a college player. Low scores, of course, are still about reducing the number or the severity of the mistakes – and then recovering well when mistakes are made, and they will always be made. But I am hitting better golf shots, and a greater variety of controlled shots, am thinking better, and manage a golf course better now than then – and am probably more patient, as well. I am also much more a student of the game than I used to be. Practice is fun now – part of the game is figuring out how to hit controlled shots – and different shots – and creating a smooth repeating swing. It's fun trying to play at a reasonable level again – and it doesn't take a competition to hold my interest. I play more to know that I *can* play, for making good shots (and friends), having good holes, creating scoring opportunities and recovering when something goes wrong – and less for final scores (or wins) – even though good scores are nice because they become a measure of the overall performance. I mean, it is just plain *fun* to post a low score – and have those “bragging rights” for a day (assuming anyone would listen). But I'd still rather hit a good shot to twenty feet on some hole than mis-hit one to within five or play a hole well and par rather than play it badly then make a lucky shot for birdie. It is more about the shots than the scores, more about my golf *game* than my golf round. Having a lucky low score is not very satisfying (of course, neither is playing well and failing to score accordingly). But am I satisfied with my current level of play? Sure – since I never thought I would be able to play at this level again. But paraphrasing a line from Ben Hogan's book – any player who says he is satisfied and doesn't desperately want to improve is lying.

So what are my goals now? Just enjoy playing a lot, being outside and maintaining some level of fitness, and just having fun with golf and playing with friends is a partial answer – and being semi-retired allows that. But golf is really a journey. And continuing to work on my game, improving my swing, learning to control shots better, then reducing the number of on-course errors – and making those errors less costly and recovering better – is another. Making those holes I don't par or birdie at least be par *opportunities* with a good putt is always nice – or at worst, making a bogey. And hitting a great shot – or being confident that there is a chance that the shot I am about to hit will work is always a goal. One *scoring* goal going into this last year was to play a sub-par round – something I had not done [as of 2009]. Over the last few years, I'd had a lot of very good nines of par or better on both the front and back nines of my home course (as well as at other places) – but only twice on the same day. So a sub-par round should be possible. My *career* best at the start of the year was an even-par 70 – shot on a fairly easy course nearly fifty years earlier as a college senior during a practice round for that year's Southern California Collegiate Championships. But it should be possible to improve on that if I could only put two of those great nines together! (That's not easy to do, of course, because it is not easy to play an entire round without making errors which cost shots.) And the difference between a great round and a poor one is often just two or three holes – which sometimes reduces to just the difference between two or three shots either hit well or hit poorly or two or three putts that either dropped or somehow stayed out of the hole.

And what is my secret *fantasy* (is it really even fair to call this a *goal*)? Making a hole-in-one? Not really, even though it is such a rare event in any golfer's life, I had done that twice this year on the short par-3 eighth hole across the lake at my home course! But shooting my age – something my dad talked about as a lifetime achievement, but never accomplished – is definitely a goal. It seems it should be possible - someday - but it might take some time and continuing good fortune to maintain this level of play (and good health) for awhile. But with a couple of recent 71s my Magic Number - or smallest differential between my current age and recent low score to date – is now just two, only two missed putts away. Only time will tell if I can reduce that difference to zero.

September 2009



## Epilogue

And then came a warm September day when all the pieces came together. A couple of early round par-saves let me think it could be a good round if I could just avoid the usual expensive mistakes. And after a dozen holes, it still looked like a solid if not spectacular score was coming together (even after one of those “expensive” blunders). Then the round was transformed into a “career” round with five birdies in the final six holes – six holes (including two five-pars) in eighteen shots – for a personal best two-under-par 69. I did it - I shot my age, one of the rarer accomplishments in golf. I am only surprised that it happened so soon – breaking 70 before breaking 70, as it were. I’ve always thought that to shoot one’s age, one would have to be either very good, very old, or both. I don’t really feel like I am either! Was it a fluke? Of course. Will I take it? Of course!

Dairy Creek Golf Course																						
HOLE		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	OUT	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	IN	TOTAL
Blue	69.9/127	375	398	173	347	446	352	500	115	393	3,099	472	417	348	144	516	180	281	477	169	3,004	6,103
Handicap		10	2	8	3	4	12	7	16	11		15	1	13	5	6	14	18	9	17		
Par		4	4	3	4	4	4	5	3	4	35	5	4	4	3	5	3	4	5	3	36	71
Score		4	4	3	5	4	4	5	2	5	36	5	4	6	2	4	3	3	4	2	33	69

When I started playing again – nearly ten years ago, I wondered if I could still break 90, and it happened quickly. Within a couple of years, it looked like I might be able to break 80 again – at least occasionally. By the time I retired, four years ago, it looked like *averaging* in the seventies was a realistic possibility – and I was back down to a single-digit handicap. And the scoring average and index have continued to creep down with more time to play and work on my game. At the beginning of this year, I would have said my "goals" - if it is fair to call them that - over the next few years were to make a hole-in-one, shoot a sub-par round, and maybe shoot my age. This year, I've accomplished all three.

December 2009

## Post-Script:

The story continues, of course. Over the next two years, I continued to play some pretty good golf - although I had not been on the course as much since my wife Leslie became seriously ill - and my priorities completely changed. But I still had some time to practice a little, and I worked on my golf swing - on tempo and balance - even when there wasn't a lot of time to play. And I was able to play enough to keep my game in reasonable shape as she often got together with friends on Wednesdays and sometimes on the weekends as well - and that meant I had some time to myself, and it was usually spent at the golf course. And being on the golf course, when she was with her friends, was nice.

Golf really is a game of numbers: What was your score? How far was that drive? What's the distance to the pin from here? What's your index now? And we all know that age is just a number - and mine is now 71. Of course, par is just a number as well - and par on the course I play most often is also 71. So I have been a bit surprised that I have shot my age - even par rounds - two more times this year. It's almost like some sort of cosmic connection - age, par, and score. I think the good rounds has something to do with playing relaxed - with what Leslie is going through, golf is just not the most important thing.

But I am unlikely to have time to play - or even practice - for awhile, as things have gotten more difficult at home. And that is okay, as golf is not where my attention lies now. And if I never played again, it would be okay.

**September 2011**

Leslie lost her battle with cancer at the end of 2011. I have found that the golf course is a wonderful place to now spend my time - outdoors in the sun, in a beautiful setting, getting some exercise, seeing friends. It is even therapeutic, in a way, and gives me something to work on which requires a certain level of attention and concentration to try to play well - hence taking my mind off the issues we had to deal with over those two years when she was ill.



So after three more years, I've had time to play a lot of golf. Although that was not what I would have wished for, it was what we knew would happen when she was diagnosed. So with lots of time, and not wanting to spend it sitting around the house, I've played more golf than I have ever played before. My game has gotten better than I would ever have expected - perhaps better than it has ever been. And I have had time to travel some, and I always have my clubs with me, so have played a number of wonderful golf courses - in California, along the coast of Oregon and in central Oregon, in the Grand Tetons, in British Columbia and the Canadian Rockies - away from my home course where I played almost exclusively during those two earlier years. So, three years later, I have been playing about as well as I could possibly hope for or expect - better and more consistently than I've ever played before. I have shot my age and better again many times by now (of course, as my son so graciously points out, that *should* be getting easier as I keep getting older!) - and have even had more rounds under par. I have even had two more holes-in-one (one of which was on an otherwise very poor round of golf)!

After returning to golf (in 2001) following that three-decade hiatus, I only played occasionally at first - not expecting that I would actually get back into it seriously. Upon "retiring", my scoring average dropped nearly immediately as I had time to devote to the game. And that average hasn't varied more than a shot or so in the last ten years. One would think I would continue to improve and that my scores would continue to drop, given how often I can now play or practice - and they have to a small extent. But I've also aged during that time - and although I've been incredibly lucky in so many ways, I also know that this scoring trend can't continue forever.

So ... what are my goals now? To continue to play, practice well to improve my shot-making, and just enjoy the game as well as my golfing friends. My *scoring* goal at this point - since I have already accomplished more than I ever expected to in golf, is to just maintain a good level of play for as long as I can.

**August 2015**