

HOLES-IN-ONE

– and near misses

Making a hole-in-one is often cited as one of the milestones of one's golfing career. That is really an odd measure, however, since it *could* occur anytime - even during one's first time on a golf course. An acquaintance of mine, who took up golf upon retiring, had an ace in his first year of golfing – long before he even broke a hundred (which I'm not sure he has done *yet!*) Others, who have been playing good golf for decades, have never had one. And a hole-in-one is not necessarily even a great shot – or even a *straight* shot, as I've heard stories of someone shanking a shot off the tee, hitting a tree or rock and bounding back onto the green and into the cup. After all, the ball must come to rest somewhere, why not in the hole? There are much better questions to ask as measures of one's golfing prowess, I would think. How many major championships have you won? What is your scoring average? What is your handicap index? Have you ever played under par (on a single hole or for an entire round - very different measures)? What is your lowest score ever – or recently? Have you ever shot your age (this is a question only for us old guys – a lifetime achievement kind of thing)? But, still, "Have you ever made a hole-in-one?" is one of those questions that gets asked frequently of golfers (especially by non-golfers).

So what are the odds? That is a good question – and one that is not easy to answer. I've read that the odds of holing out any given shot is one in 33,000. That statistic does not make any sense to me. There is zero probability of holing out a tee shot on a long par five – and a very high probability of making a tap-in putt. A better statistic is probably estimating the probability of making a hole-in-one on a three-par hole. Since most such holes are within reach on the tee shot for most golfers who play regularly – especially since most golfers usually choose the tee boxes they play from to be consistent with their skills. With that in mind, I've read the chances are about one in 12,000 of acing a three-par hole - or one every 3000 rounds. That suggests that if one played twice a week with four three-pars per round as on most golf courses, there would be about 400 chances per year – or about once in 30 years of golf to actually make a hole-in-one. That is, for most golfers, it really *is* a lifetime achievement. Such a statistic must be for all golfers, however – and the chances are surely much different for a beginner than for a touring pro. I do find it interesting, however, that two professional golfers I know well (both teaching club pros), have each only had one ace in their long careers and one of those was actually on a blind dog-leg four-par hole. One would think that with their obvious skills and the amount that they play, it would have happened more often.

One way to think about the odds for any particular golfer is to think about how often a shot stops within, say, two feet of the hole on par three holes. That is because the area of a circle two feet in radius is one hundred times the area of the cup. So one would think that the probability of making an ace would be one percent of the probability of getting the shot "inside the leather" – *i.e.*, within about two feet. That makes the odds very personal – and connected to one's own skills and the courses one plays (that is, whether there are short or long or easy or difficult par three holes that are regularly played). Assuming that three or four times a year one might hit a shot inside two feet still suggests that thirty years could go by without one of those dropping for an ace.

The perfect golf shot!

I made a hole-in-one once in my earlier life while in college – on a casual summer round on a short par 3 on a course near San Diego while playing with two priests whom I didn't know. But my first since returning to golf after a very long hiatus was much better. It came on the par-3 eighth across the lake on my home course in 2009. I've played the hole hundreds of times – and have even come close on several occasions. On this particular day, the pin was on the left front – only about 120 yards - just a knock-down nine-iron that was right from the time my club made contact. My Pro V1 almost hit the hole on the fly, took one short hop, then backed in. The odds are pretty small – even on a short hole. Was it a great shot? Absolutely. Was it luck that it went in? Absolutely. Ben Hogan once said that it takes skill to get within two feet – but if it goes in, it is luck.



Any hole-in-one is a surprise – just because even a great shot has only a very small chance of dropping. So imagine my surprise when only seven months after that great (and lucky) shot on the eighth hole across the lake, I essentially duplicated the feat!! The pin was in a different position – and I even mentioned to my playing partner what a “sucker pin” position it was being right on a ridge which separates the left and right sides of the green. Then I hit the perfect pitching wedge. “Oh yes, go in the hole!”, or something to that effect, my partner said when it was still in mid-air. Again, the ball hit about a foot past the hole, took a short hop, then spun back into the cup – essentially a re-run of the shot a few months before. I had played that hole about fifty times since the first ace. What is the probability that in hitting a bucket of balls across that lake – even though it is only wedge shot away – that two would be holed? Given the published odds of making a hole-in-one – even the odds quoted for a touring pro (about one in 3300) – that is an unlikely thing to happen. And it could well be that it will not happen again in my lifetime!

Well ... it did - three years later. It came on a gorgeous day at Avila Beach Golf Resort - but one in which the golf itself was not very good. Some good shots - but a lot of mishits as well. So even the ace on hole no. 6 didn't lead to a good score. But it was a great shot - a six-iron toward the center of the green, a baby cut which hit six feet from the far right-hand pin position, one hop, checked and popped into the cup. Lucky? Of course - but a great shot none-the-less. That shot - lucky or not - was my third hole-in-one since returning to golf in 2000 - the two in 2009 and then this one. As mentioned before, the quoted odds are 1 in 12,000 on par-3 holes for the general population of golfers and about one in 3300 or so for touring pros. So in about 700 rounds - over 3000 or so 3-pars holes on the courses I play, I had made three.



Then, a year later, at Chalk Mountain while practicing for the County Senior Amateur, I holed a 176 yard 5-iron on the par-3 third hole on my way to a two-over 74. It was my fourth hole-in-one in five years! Not something anyone should ever expect. It was a good - but not brilliant - shot to the left side of the green which then spun down the slope toward the hole and disappeared. I was testing a very visible optic-yellow ball which made it easy to see go in! Those shots are always lucky when they go in. But good shots make the opportunity to go in possible. (I was playing alone - but the guy in the adjacent fairway starting jumping up and down when it went in. He then went into the pro shop at the turn to attest to it!)

But *near* aces, of course, are much more common. Only a couple of weeks before that first one, I stuck a 3-hybrid inside a foot from the back tee on the 190 yard third hole at Chalk Mountain. A few weeks after my ace, on that eighth hole across the lake, I stopped a pitching wedge about a foot away - as did my playing opponent (whom I had witnessed acing the same hole a year or two earlier). Both of those shots were good – but not *great* golf shots. We both backed off a little on our wedges, hit just short of the green (risky, because of the lake) and bounded forward toward the hole rather than spinning back into the water. We got away with those shots - two near aces to halve the hole! Then on a very windy afternoon a couple of months later, I hit a hybrid on the 190 yard par-3 15th hole into the wind across a ravine. I knew it was well-struck and straight – but couldn't see where the ball stopped since we were looking directly into the late afternoon sun. And there it was, hanging on the lip of the cup – half an inch too far left.



Any of these shots is a combination of skill and good fortune. Had any of them missed the cup and gone a few feet by or stopped a few feet short, they would have been equally good shots (and still birdie opportunities, which is what we all play for anyway). But having them drop – or even stop very close – is pretty exciting, and is what keeps us coming back to play again!