

Nick and Choose { NICK ALTSCHULLER }

GOLF, THE UNFAIR WAY

Testing out cheats in a gentleman's game



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I USED TO TAKE GOLF SERIOUSLY. I practiced. I had my swing analyzed. I spent one summer as a groundskeeper at a fancy golf course, waking at 5 am to rake sand traps. I might have returned the following year had the offer not been rescinded for breaking two mowers and stunt-driving the carts. It was around that time that I revised my attitude toward the game.

To excel at golf requires terrific amounts of money and time spent brandishing a deadly weapon while strangers critique your hip alignment. On the other hand, accepting mediocrity frees you from that pressure and from ever evolving into the sort of person who keeps a foam putting green in his office. Abandon the pipe dream of consistent performance and the good walk spoiled becomes the more satisfying Sunday drive, perhaps with a cold beer in the cup holder. My game transformed once I embraced the life of the duffer. However, I understood if I ever wanted to beat anyone decent, I'd have to become a cheater.

Cheating is woven into the fabric of golf. The only players who don't scribble the odd numerical fib on the scorecard are the ones who occasionally sign giant novelty checks. If your opponent hooks a drive into a nearby elm, it's unseemly not to grant a mulligan. There are now technological aids for bending the rules, but while no one would blink if you pulled the latest titanium, offset, adjustable driver from your bag, if you rest your ball on anything other than an antiquated splinter of wood, eyebrows will rise.

Before my first round of the year, I picked up three packs of newfangled tees. There was the Brush T (\$8), which gives the appearance that you're prepping your Titleist for a shave, and the 4 Yards More (\$7) and Pride Professional Offset (\$6), both of which feature small prongs that hold your ball aloft like a precious jewel. The idea is to provide more distance through less friction, and while there may have been appreciable length added to my drives, it was only serving to deposit my ball further into the woods. Plus, when you shoot a 57 on the front nine, doing so with the aid of science only increases the embarrassment.



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While silly, the USGA-approved tees didn't technically count as cheats, so on the back nine I went old-school. It's a hustler's trick to apply a lubricant like Vaseline or spit onto the driver face, as it's supposed to reduce the spin on the ball, turning your brutal slice into something that may actually see the fairway. Before teeing off, I smeared ChapStick on my 3-wood like I was greasing a baking pan. The tactic showed modest results. Yet the tacky petroleum also clearly showed how poorly I was striking the ball, as viscous, lip-balm kisses popped up around the face's heel and toe. The evidence revealed my lack of skill, but I was nonetheless winning the game, largely due to the crafty strategy of playing friends whose golf talents are (pardon the phrase) subpar.

A week later I faced a steeper challenge: a seasoned player who would display no mercy—my girlfriend. Wanting to up my fraudulent game, I went on the Internet for the kind of equipment not sold at reputable retailers. First there were the Intech Anti-Slice tees (\$5 for five), which cup the ball like a jai alai stick to create a launching pad for straight drives. The thin plastic backings only last a single swing, so I

waited until the seventh hole, the course's most difficult, before I planted one into the tee box. After I launched a rocket down the fairway, a nearby, skilled, golfer asked, "Who said cheaters never prosper?"

Less successful were the Polara Ultimate Straight XS Self Correcting Golf Balls (\$35 for 12). With a specialized dimple pattern, the ball is designed to self-correct in the air, reducing the likelihood of a hook or slice. It also feels like you're spanking a rock, and the Polara will often crash like an asteroid yards in front of your target. After thumping one for most of the front nine I found myself three strokes back, so I put it away (by unintentionally shanking it into the bushes).

I also stopped cheating. The schemes became too much to think about: which ball, which tee, which ChapStick was safe to use on my lips. The loss of authenticity is disheartening, as you never know if a good shot would've flown as true without the autopilot. Plus, losing with unfair advantages means you really stink, so cheating adds pressure, and pressure is what I decided to drop from my game years ago.

Unshackled from my chicanery, I actually won the back nine. It was a victory both minor and ignoble, but it was genuine. For the duffer, it's better to be bad with no apologies than triumphant with transgressions. ***

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