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The Golf Gene

By [JOHN TIERNEY](#)

The P.G.A. championship didn't end until Monday, which was ostensibly a workday, but more than five million men still managed to watch it on television. Why?

As an action-packed sport, golf ranks down with baseball and bowling, except that baseball is faster-paced and bowlers are whirling dervishes compared with golfers. Some golfers do exhibit sudden movements when they win a tournament, but it's always a shock to see they can get both feet in the air at once.

Golf features no body contact, no car crashes and no cheerleaders, yet men keep watching. They make up more than 80 percent of the TV audience for golf. This might simply be because they like watching a game they play themselves; men make up nearly 80 percent of the golfers in America, too. But then why do so many guys play such a frustrating game?

You could theorize that this is a cultural phenomenon, a holdover from the days of alpha males playing at exclusive clubs. But even though most courses have been opened to women, the percentage of golfers who are women hasn't risen in 15 years. Another traditional country-club sport, tennis, is played by nearly as many women as men, but golf remains one of the most segregated sports by sex - more male-dominated than rock climbing, racquetball, pool or roller hockey.

The male-female ratio is about the same as in paintball, a war game that always made more sense to me than golf. My basic feeling toward golf - hatred - probably has something to do with how badly I did the couple of times I played, but incompetence didn't seem to stop other guys from becoming obsessed with it.

I couldn't imagine what possessed them until I learned about disc golf, which began as a mellow sport for both sexes three decades ago, played by hippies in Grateful Dead T-shirts who flung Frisbees into baskets mounted on poles in public parks. Today there are 1,700 courses and a pro tour that includes superb women players.

But more than 90 percent of the disc golf players, pros and duffers, are men. The best explanation I can offer for the disparity is what happened to me the first time I teed off several years ago.

Our foursome started at a tee on high ground, looking down a tree-lined swath of grass at the basket nearly 400 feet away. After we flung our discs, as we headed down the fairway, I felt a strange surge of satisfaction. I couldn't figure out why until it occurred to me what we were: a bunch of guys converging on a target and hurling projectiles at it.

Was golf the modern version of Pleistocene hunting on the savanna? The notion had already occurred to devotees of evolutionary psychology, as I discovered from reading Edward O. Wilson and Steve Sailer. They point to surveys and other research showing that people in widely different places and cultures have a common vision of what makes a beautiful landscape - and it looks a lot like the view from golfers' favorite tees.

The ideal is a vista from high ground overlooking open, rolling grassland dotted with low-branched trees and a body of water. It would have been a familiar and presumably pleasant view for ancient hunters: an open savanna where prey could be spotted as they grazed; a water hole to attract animals; trees offering safe hiding places for hunters.

The descendants of those hunters seem to have inherited their fascination with hitting targets, because today's men excel at tests asking them to predict the flights of projectiles. They also seem to get a special pleasure from watching such flights, both in video games and real life. No matter how many times male pilots have seen a plane land, they'll watch another one just for the satisfaction of seeing the trajectory meet the ground.

That's the only plausible excuse for watching golf. Men, besides having a primal affection for the vistas of fairways, get so much joy watching that little ball fly toward the green that they'll sit through everything else. One sight of a putt dropping in the hole makes up for long moments watching pudgy guys agonize over which club to use.

I realize, of course, that this is conjecture. But it could be tested if some enterprising anthropologist showed a video of the P.G.A. championship to the men and women in one of the remaining hunter-gatherer societies. I predict that only the men would take the day off to watch.

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For Further Reading:

[From Bauhaus to Golf Course: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of the Art of Golf Course Architecture](#) by Steve Sailer. The American Conservative, April 11, 2005.

[The Natural History Of Art: Possible animal influence on human perception of art](#) by Richard Conniff. Discover, November 1999.

[Heroes, Rogues, and Lovers: Testosterone and Behavior](#) by James McBride Dabbs with Mary Godwin Dabbs. McGraw-Hill, 256 pp., July 2000.

["Aesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology"](#) by Denis Dutton. The Oxford Handbook for Aesthetics, edited by Jerrold Levinson. Oxford University Press, 2003.

[Professional Disc Golf Association](#)