

(The following was originally printed on the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal sometime in the early 1970's. It was written by Armen A. Alchian, a professor of economics at the University of California, Los Angeles.)

OF GOLF, CAPITALISM, AND SOCIALISM

A puzzle has been solved. Despite their intense interest in sports, no golf courses exist in the Socialist-Communist bloc. Why is golf solely in capitalistic societies? Because it is not merely a sport. It is an activity, a lifestyle, a behavior, a manifestation of the essential human spirit. Golf's ethic, principles, rules and procedures of play are totally capitalistic. They are antithetical to socialism. Golf requires self-reliance, independence, responsibility, integrity and trust. No extenuation is granted misfortune, mistake or incompetence. No second chance. Like life, it is often unfair and unjust, with uninsurable risks. More than any other sport, golf exploits the whole capitalist spirit.

A golfer is his own creator, his own destroyer. He plays his own ball. It is a contest against Nature, by, and yet against, himself. No scapegoat can be found - no socializing of skill or consequences. No opponent's or partner's skill or clumsiness affects his performance. Tennis has an opponent on whom one can rely for aid or error. Football, with many partners and many opponents, is more socialistic.

Randomness of fortunes in golf, as in life and investment, defies specification, calculation, or insurance. Rolling into a divot mark, getting a bad bounce or lie in a bunker is part of the game. The game even has a name for this unfairness - "rub of the green". Like illness or disaster it is to be borne without relief. The unfairness of golf is like that of capitalism. Some risks and hazards are foreseeable. Bunkers, trees, lakes and wind cunningly offer a rewarding or disastrous gamble or test resistance to temptation. A golfer plays his own style and reaps his own rewards - or consequences. Whatever causes misfortune makes no difference. He alone bears the consequences. No socializing of disaster or success.

No second chances. Every stroke counts in golf. In other activities, second and even third chances are given. Two serves in tennis, two free throws to make one in basketball, three strikes in baseball, four downs in football. In golf, no later act or good fortune will cancel earlier misfortunes; but later misfortune will cancel earlier good performance.

Honor and integrity are always at stake. A golfer monitors himself with no possibility for a stroke to be uncounted. Any temptation to dishonesty is thwarted by the impossibility of lying to one's self successfully. You live with what you do, not with what you may say you did. No umpire calls errors; no umpire judges performance. The game is purely objective. A stroke was taken or it wasn't; the ball is out of bounds or it isn't; on the green or it isn't; in the cup or it isn't.

How elegantly one performs is irrelevant. No A's for effort - only for results. Only the number of strokes counts, not how you did it. Results - not intentions, or procedure - count. How thoroughly capitalistic.

The game is unreliable. Disaster strikes in the midst of good performance. Confidence is shaken. Was it luck? Deterioration in ability? What change could be made, if any? As in capitalistic society, those persisting questions

are answered privately with responsibility for consequences yours alone. The reward for good performance - whether by real skill or good luck - is insecure. If due to increased skill, a new reference base is established, and elusive improvement remains the goal. To do better - always better - is the goal. How powerfully capitalistic and antisocialist.

Antisocialist, but not antisocial. More, it is individualist and civilized. A golfer is courteous to other golfers. He does not distract others from their best play. He does not gain - and more important - does not lose by success, or failure, of others.

Golf is conservative. Rules change slowly; some never. Ancient and honorable customs must enhance survival values if they have withstood the test of time.

The socialist spirit, so pervasive in other areas, has tried to invade golf. Handicaps are proposed to equalize results. But a true golfer shuns handicap play. At best it is to him only an index - a prestige - of ability. Efforts to make competition more equal or "fair" are diseases that would have killed a less capitalistic game. The socialists have also sought to reduce the penalties for misadventure - the two-stroke penalty for a ball out-of-bounds or lost. A two-stroke penalty for a ball lost because of poor eyesight or because of weeds was deemed unfair. But not by the true golfer who understands the reasons. The game withstood that attempt and the conventional penalty has been restored.

Match play was introduced to permit partners or opponents to save one from himself. But the true golfer plays for his own score. What his playing companions do is of no interest, either during or after play.

Even in the beginning of golf we have evidence. Who but the self-reliant Scots, the progenitors of Adam Smith, could create a game so congenial to the capitalist society and mentality. And at this end of history, who have become the most recent and avid devotees of golf? The Japanese and nationalist Chinese. Is more evidence required to demonstrate that golf is the spirit of capitalism?

Looking into the dim future, if golf is ever to enter in the rifts of the socialist bloc, surely it will be where the latent, but suppressed, capitalistic spirit is strongest - in the valleys of Soviet Armenia. Actually, seven courses exist in Czechoslovakia, holdovers from World War II society with 1,000 members - only 160 per course. Is it surprising the Czechs are the most troublesome people now behind the curtain?