

Turn the unknown to your advantage as you expand your circle of golfing friends

By Jim Apfelbaum & Barbara Puett

Everyone has friends they enjoy playing with, and the longer you play golf, the more friends you'll make. These friendships become special and memorable—much more meaningful over time than good or bad scores.

One of golf's irrefutable trials by fire is playing with strangers. Four singles may be paired together, or you may be asked to join three others as the odd man out among close friends. Other times, when you're sharing the round with your friends, up pops a stranger to fill out the foursome.

How does he play? Will he slow us down? Is he better than we are? Will we slow him down? The first tee swirls with a lot of as-yet unanswered questions.

The scenarios are endless, but the courtesies and decorum of golf never vary, and a few basics will keep you in good stead. The great thing about etiquette is that it builds confidence. With an understanding of proper etiquette, you can play comfortably with anyone, anywhere, regardless of your skill level or gender.

All anyone can ask is that you be civil, along the lines of the Second Commandment. Treat your partner as you'd like to be treated—attend the flag, keep up, be courteous while others play their shots, watch yourself around others' putting lines. You don't have to be a cheerleader, but it can be an awfully long afternoon when three buddies go out of their way to ignore a stranger whose only fault is that he wanted to play golf and didn't have a game.

When someone joins you and your friends, make your new partner feel welcome. Help set a pleasant tone for the round by introducing yourself and shaking hands. After all, golf reveals an awful lot about a person. You may never see each other again, or you may end up exchanging business cards, playing regularly or even doing business with the person. There's no reason to treat

the occasion any differently than if you were meeting someone for the first time in any other circumstances.

Keep up, stifle the urge to apologize for miscues, and you'll be in good shape. Helping someone find the ball by lining up an errant shot with a tree or bush, or keeping track of a partner's score to be able to say, "nice par," as the ball is still rattling in the cup, is more than expected.

Invariably, people play their own games. Strangers sometimes feel compelled to go along with what everyone else is doing, to the point of playing tees they'd normally not play. Stick with what works. There's no reason golfers can't play together from different tees. That's why they're there and that's one of golf's great pleasures: It offers players of differing abilities the opportunity to enjoy the same game together. Better players will appreciate your honesty if you're playing the appropriate tees.

The concerns raised by playing with strangers are not just beginners' problems—better players have to watch themselves, too. They need to resist the powerful urge to give advice, and just like the rest of us, they need to curb their complaining and analyzing. Better players can also reinforce the traditions of the game by complimenting proper etiquette when they see it.

A new player who is making an effort to do the right things needs to know it's appreciated. Etiquette requires consideration of others. It takes conscious effort. When you see golfers doing their best to observe the traditions and spirit of golf, let them know it. Pass on a good word—every bit helps. As Tom Kite wrote in the forward to "Golf Etiquette," "As the game continues to grow in popularity, the rules of etiquette become even more important." ●

Barbara Puett and Jim Apfelbaum are co-authors of "Golf Etiquette" published by St. Martin's Press.