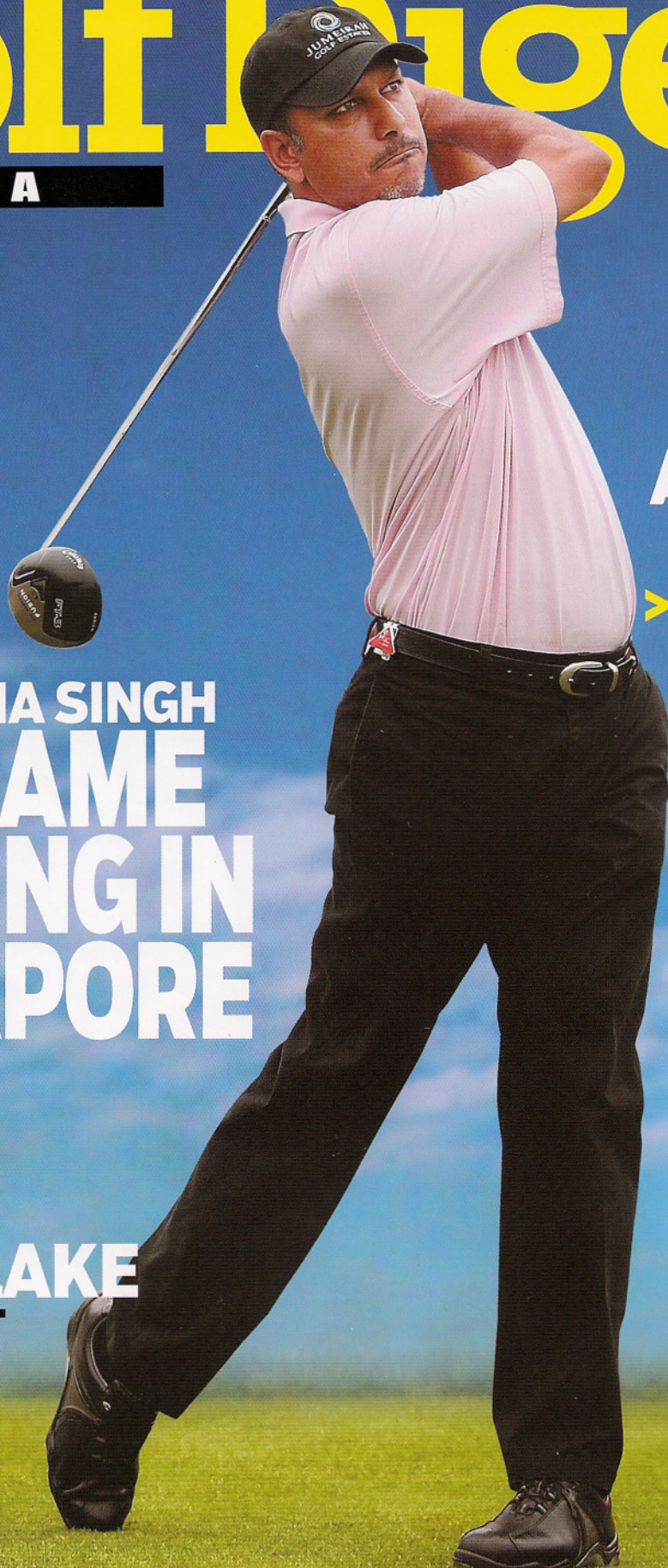


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# The decline of American golf

I PLAYED THREE CHARITY TOURNAMENTS AND ABOUT SIX RECREATIONAL ROUNDS OF GOLF THIS YEAR. THAT'S NOT MUCH. AS AN AVID GOLF WRITER AND FAN, I SHOULD PLAY MORE. BUT BETWEEN WORK AND FAMILY, IT JUST DIDN'T HAPPEN

BY NEIL SAGEBIEL

And yet, according to America's National Golf Foundation, I'm a 'Core Golfer', one of the approximately 15 million American adults who play eight or more times a year. Playing less than once a month doesn't seem like adequate 'Core Golfer' standard to me.

Setting the bar at just eight annual rounds may help to explain a troubling trend: despite the worldwide popularity of Tiger Woods, the extreme wealth and widespread exposure of the PGA Tour, and a glut of public and private golf courses, American golf has been in decline since 2000.

While golf in India booms, recreational golf in America suffers from noticeable attrition. Rounds played dropped from 518 million in 2000 to 501 million in 2006. Roughly three million Americans quit golf each year. Slightly fewer take up the game.

"The man in the street will tell you that golf is booming because he sees Tiger Woods on TV. But we track the reality. The reality is, while we haven't exactly tanked, the numbers have been disappointing for

some time," said National Golf Foundation Research Director Jim Kass in a *New York Times* story earlier this year.

Who is the American golfer? Here's a basic portrait:

**Gender:** primarily male  
**Education:** usually college  
**Age:** middle aged (or older)  
**Income:** relatively affluent  
**Average score:** 96  
**Locale:** 20 percent live in the South Atlantic region of the United States, where temperate weather encourages year-round play  
**Began playing golf:** most start in their teens, two out of three by age 25.

John, a 65-year-old writer who lives in New York City, plays about 10 times a year. That qualifies him as a Core Golfer, according to the National Golf Foundation definition. "I like to play alone and hit several balls," he says. "Play against myself!"

John took up the game at age 10 as a caddie in Chicago, Illinois. Work is his barrier to playing more golf. Work is just one of myriad reasons why American golf has been in decline. Time-strapped men, who in past generations

might have spent the entire day at the golf course, now often spend more time with their families. They shadow their kids at weekend activities such as soccer and gymnastics. And working women still do most of the home chores, leaving scant time to pursue the leisurely game of golf.

Emily, however, plays a lot. She is a 57-year-old executive producer who lives in Nashville, Tennessee. Emily records 100-plus rounds a year and possesses a six-handicap, posting scores in the 70s and low 80s. "I love golf and wish I could play all the time," she says. Emily also thrives on competitive golf, playing in amateur events. She didn't take up golf in earnest until her mid 40s, and would play even more were it not for the demands of her job.

A diverse American culture that offers countless leisure options has also had a siphoning effect on golf. Outdoor sports such as snowboarding and skateboarding have attracted youth. And "there is a younger generation that is just not as active" noted one American professor of recreation studies and tourism. Younger generations turn to indoor activities such as electronic and computer-based games

to fill their leisure time, which does not bode well for growing the game of golf.

Eric took up golf in his teens before the advent of computer games. The 50-year-old specialized home foster-care provider lives in the quiet rural solitude of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. He plays about 50 rounds a year and shoots in the high 70s to mid 80s. "I enjoy the game tremendously," he says, "but I also like being in the elements, the calmness of the outdoors." For Eric, golf is "mental therapy". Work and other obligations prevent him from indulging in even more golf therapy.

Besides work and general busyness, there are also socio-economic barriers to the game such as cost, and access to instruction and facilities. Initiatives such as Play Golf America and The First Tee, a juniors program, seek to change that. "Juniors are a noble cause," says Hank Haney, Tiger Woods' teacher, in *Golf Digest*. "But what we need are 50 and 60-year-olds to get into it, because they're real, live consumers. They have an interest in playing, but nobody's making it easier for them."

Indeed, attracting and keeping players has been more difficult in the 21st century. It's uncertain if American golf will grow or continue its current slide. Meanwhile, I hope to do my part by getting in a few more rounds next year.

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