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Executive Life

You Hate Golf. Can You Ever Succeed?

By THOM WEIDLICH

As head of a public relations and lobbying firm, Mark J. Grossman is constantly invited to golf outings with business leaders and politicians. He turns down every offer.

"I don't go because, basically, I don't enjoy golf and I'm not good at it," said Mr. Grossman, the chief executive of the firm, **Grossman Strategies** of Holtsville, N.Y., and a former Suffolk County aide to Mario M. Cuomo when he was governor. "I don't know which comes first."

What? Turn down an invitation to mingle with clients and maybe cut a deal? Isn't golf a job requirement for any corporate executive with serious career ambitions? Isn't not having a golf handicap a business handicap?

Maybe, but some executives forgo the fairway anyway. "I just don't have an interest in hitting white balls or yellow balls," said Douglas Jemal, the president of the **Douglas Development** Corporation in Washington, a real-estate concern. "The people who play golf leave the course with all the frustrations they went on it with. I grew up playing stickball in Brooklyn, from manhole to manhole. What did golf ever do for me?"

Some executives know that they will never be good at the game and figure that nobody wants to play with a duffer. Others dismiss golf as so much puttering around or, as Mark Twain put it, "a good walk spoiled."

Still others may want to indulge but lack the time. Thomas J. Caldwell says his golf game "went out the window" two years ago when he started **TDI Products**, a Jacksonville Beach, Fla., maker of electric-cord reels for recreational vehicles and boats. "Golf just takes so long," he said. "I didn't decide to stop. It just happened that way."

But does ignoring a prime networking opportunity damage career prospects? One-third of chief financial officers surveyed in a study by RHI Management Resources, a staffing firm in Menlo Park, Calif., said golf was at least somewhat important to enhancing a career, compared with 45 percent who said golf was "not at all important." Another RHI study of chief financial officers showed that, outside the office, the second most common place to close a deal was the golf course, with one in 10 respondents saying they had done so. (No. 1 was over a meal.)

Mark J. Grossman, a public relations specialist, may not like golf, but he likes helping his daughter Halle kick a much larger ball in a soccer game.

On the links, some executives say, they can better negotiate deals or get a better view of how a job candidate reacts to pressure. But not everyone buys such arguments. "I think it's an interesting rationalization to justify being there to those they work with, their spouses and their controllers," said Patrick S. Flood, a nongolfer who is chief executive of the **HomeBanc Mortgage** Corporation in Atlanta.

Even so, some executives say their abstinence from golf can put them at a disadvantage. "I do feel I'm being left out of some exclusive club," Mr. Grossman said.

Deciding whether to take up golf may depend on your executive role, or your athletic skills. If your job is to sell medical equipment to doctors, you probably should pick up a club. But you might think twice if your swing is awful.

Charlene Y. Stern, a senior vice president at **NewGround**, a bank services firm in St. Louis, says that most chief executives with whom she deals are golfers, but that they don't necessarily want to play with amateurs. She recalls that the one time she played, her aghast partner asked her to walk the ball after the first hole.

A few months ago, Ms. Stern turned down an invitation from an industry leader to fly to a conference in Las Vegas to golf with several bankers whom she had wanted to meet. "I had to say I would join them for dinner at another conference," she said. "But I didn't want the rain check. I wanted to be there."

In Japan, it is probably more of a drawback to stay away from the links. "The Japanese are extraordinarily passionate about golf," said David P. Berman, the chief executive of Airia, an in-flight entertainment company in Annapolis, Md. For several years, while working for another company, he commuted to Tokyo. "Not playing golf there made life somewhat complicated, because a lot was decided on the golf course," he said. "You miss out on opportunities. You miss the relationship-building portion."

The role of golf may be a bigger issue for women, because many of them just don't play the game. Gail Evans, a former executive vice president at CNN and the author of "Play Like a Man, Win Like a Woman" (Broadway Books), says that when she speaks to her mostly female audiences, one of the most frequent questions is whether golf is necessary for success.

Ms. Evans, who does not play golf (the word "play" in her book title refers to the work world, not the putting green), tells them that the answer is no. And a dozen female executives she has asked about the issue agree with her, she said. "They all said you don't play golf unless you want to play golf," she said, "and you make the relationships in other ways, but you have to make the relationships."

How do you do that?

Executives who do not golf say that the main outlet is breakfast, lunch or dinner, but that concerts or sports events can work well, too. Ms. Evans once had a boss who loved to play the market, so they would get together to trade stocks and chat about business.

EVERY November, Gianluca Rattazzi, the chief executive of the **BlueArc** Corporation, a data-storage systems maker in San Jose, Calif., goes on a weekend trip to a castle in Scotland, golf's likely birthplace, and hunts birds with potential BlueArc customers and partners.

"It's similar to golf," Mr. Rattazzi said. "The difference is that in golf, you hit the ball, and here, you hit the bird with a shotgun."

Another common place for golf-shy executives to meet their golf-passionate colleagues is at the stop after the 18th hole: the 19th hole, also known as the bar.