

The Presiden

Playing golf hasn't always been a boon to presidential aspirations. The American public once viewed the game as elitist. Yet since the early 20th century, most U.S. Presidents have been golfers, usually playing with considerably more enthusiasm than skill.

BY MERRELL NODEN

WITH THE 1908 ELECTION APPROACHING FAST, TEDDY Roosevelt had some pithy advice for the man he hoped would succeed him as president. "Golf," he told William Howard Taft, "is fatal."

The old Rough Rider was not warning Taft about the game's inherent dangers—Gerald Ford hadn't been born yet—nor was he reminding him that walking 18 holes could literally kill a man of Taft's extraordinary girth. No, Roosevelt was talking about the purely political costs of golf, the peril in playing a newfangled game most Americans regarded as an eccentricity best left to the Old

World. Who in his right mind was going to vote for a man who spent the better part of an afternoon wandering around a field, hunting for a little ball?

You might think that the time it takes to play a round of golf would be enough to keep the man with the world's busiest schedule off the links. But no: After Roosevelt, there have been only three presidents who did not play golf—Herbert Hoover, Harry Truman and Jimmy Carter. Every other 20th-century president, from Taft to George W. Bush, has played, most of them with more enthusiasm than skill. Regardless of the outcome of the 2004 election, there will continue to be a golfer in the White House, since both Bush and John Kerry enjoy the game.

In one way or another, every golfer who has followed Taft into the White House has had to ponder Roosevelt's warning. Almost all have fretted about being linked to a plutocratic game; if they didn't fret, their advisers did. When Bill Clinton announced plans to take a vacation in Colorado, his then-advisor Dick Morris hastily conducted a poll that indicated Clinton would be wise to limit his activities to camping or hiking—anything but playing a rich man's game like golf.

The stylish John F. Kennedy may have been the most talented golfer to occupy the White House.



tial Pastime

"Maybe if I wear a baseball cap?" Clinton asked, wistfully.

Morris still said no, but Clinton played 36 holes anyway.

Clinton and his golfing predecessors probably needn't have worried. Or so Don Van Natta, Jr. argues in his very entertaining book, *First off the Tee:*

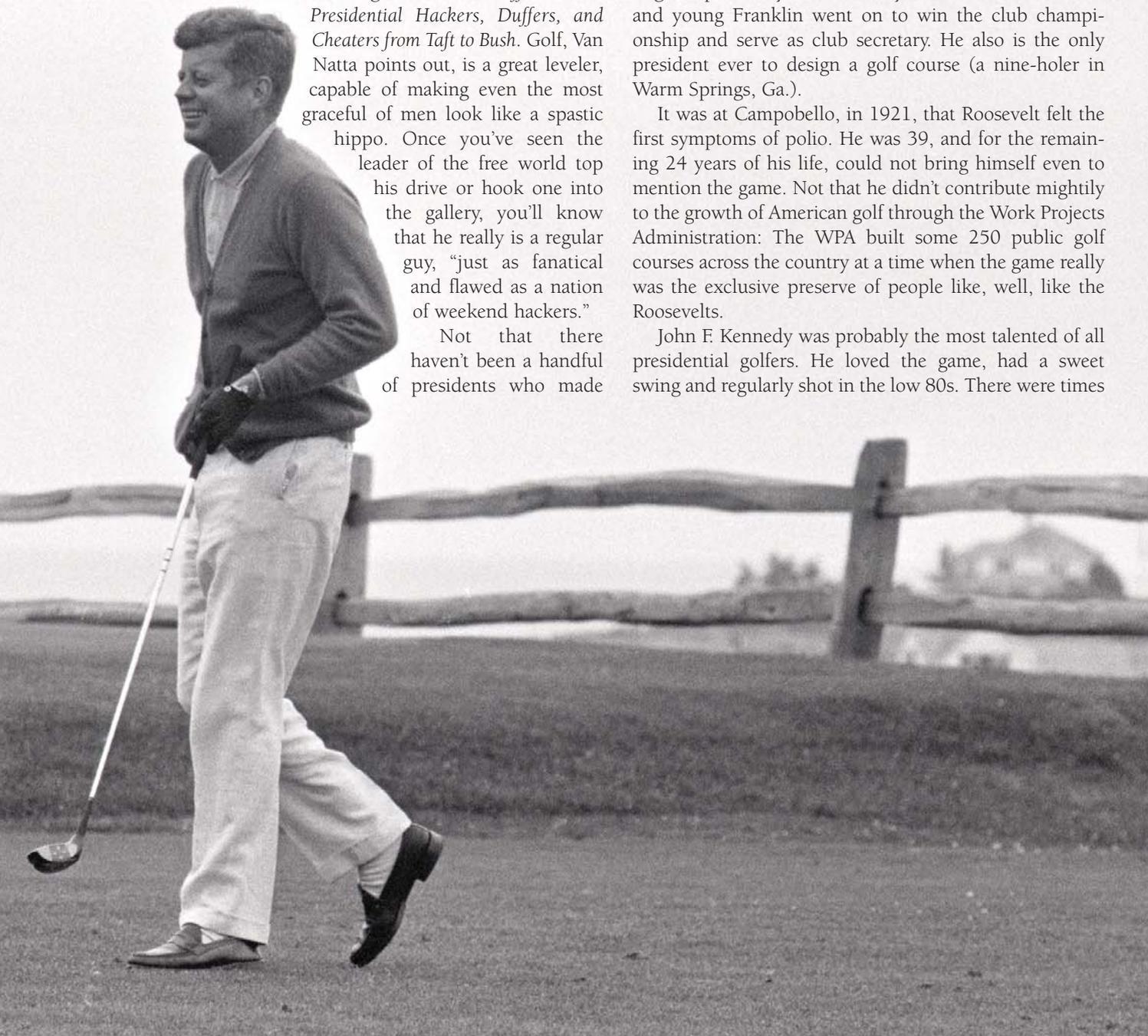
Presidential Hackers, Duffers, and Cheaters from Taft to Bush. Golf, Van Natta points out, is a great leveler, capable of making even the most graceful of men look like a spastic hippo. Once you've seen the leader of the free world top his drive or hook one into the gallery, you'll know that he really is a regular guy, "just as fanatical and flawed as a nation of weekend hackers."

Not that there haven't been a handful of presidents who made

the game look easy. Franklin Delano Roosevelt learned to play on the six-hole course his father built around the family estate in Hyde Park, N.Y., and then at Campobello Golf Club, in the Canadian province of New Brunswick. The Roosevelts happened to own Campobello—which might explain why Cousin Teddy sounded so defensive—and young Franklin went on to win the club championship and serve as club secretary. He also is the only president ever to design a golf course (a nine-holer in Warm Springs, Ga.).

It was at Campobello, in 1921, that Roosevelt felt the first symptoms of polio. He was 39, and for the remaining 24 years of his life, could not bring himself even to mention the game. Not that he didn't contribute mightily to the growth of American golf through the Work Projects Administration: The WPA built some 250 public golf courses across the country at a time when the game really was the exclusive preserve of people like, well, like the Roosevelts.

John F. Kennedy was probably the most talented of all presidential golfers. He loved the game, had a sweet swing and regularly shot in the low 80s. There were times

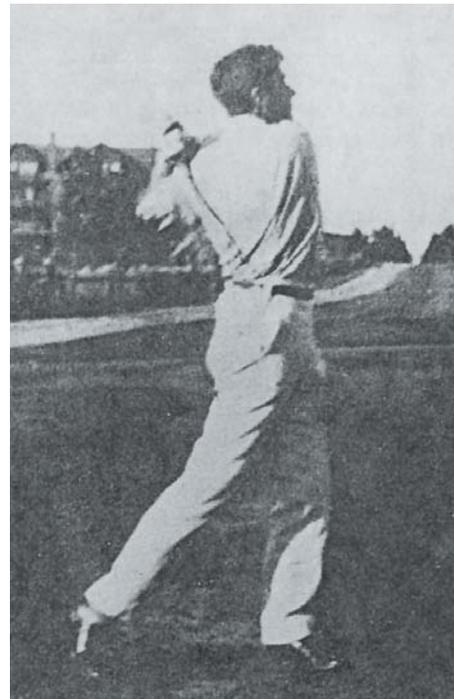




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Neither Taft (left) nor Wilson (middle) were good golfers, but both took delight in the game; FDR (right) was more skilled, but polio stole the game from him before his presidency.

when Kennedy's absence from the White House was mistakenly attributed to womanizing when in fact he had sneaked off to play golf. Kennedy would go to any lengths to keep his golfing secret. He knew that the people were not ready to tolerate yet another chief executive who spent nearly as much time playing golf as he did managing the affairs of state.

The people had a point: In eight years as president, Dwight Eisenhower played 210 rounds...at Augusta National alone! He had a putting green installed outside the Oval Office and literally left his mark upon the place in the form of the spike marks that scuffed the wooden floor. When Ike ran for reelection in 1956, the Democrats had a field day with his golf obsession, distributing bumper stickers that read: "Ben Hogan for President. If we're going to have a golfer, let's have a good one."

But as we know, Ike won again, perhaps because the Democrats had done such a poor job of reading the zeitgeist. In the 1950s, America was fast becoming a nation of golfers, thanks partly to Arnold Palmer but also to Eisenhower himself. When Ike took office, 3.2 million Americans played the game; when he left eight years later, the number had doubled.

Kennedy was not the only president

over whom Ike's love of the game cast a shadow. Richard Nixon, who served eight years as vice president under Ike, was the quintessential junior exec, desperate to win the boss' approval on the golf course. Ike once caught Nixon disregarding the rules—throwing his ball out of some particularly nasty rough—but chose to say nothing, making it one of history's great missed opportunities. Nixon cut a strange figure on the course, wearing his pants "Gomer Pyle-high," according to one observer. As with much that Nixon did, there was little apparent joy in his play, only a kind of sour determination. Four years after leaving office, he claimed to have finally broken 80, shooting a 79 in San Clemente. For most anyone else, this would have served as a great motivation. Not Nixon. He never played again, convinced he could never do better.

But Nixon was an anomaly, on the course and off. Most presidents have taken great pleasure in the stolen hours they've managed to spend on the golf course. Golf is a favorite presidential pastime partly because presidents tend to come from the golfing demographic, but also because they are by nature competitive and golf is one of the few sports someone old enough to be president can still play. Mostly, though, presidents see the golf course as a

blissful haven, where neither press nor public can intrude. It is not too much to assume that golf has kept more than one president sane.

Ulysses S. Grant was the first president to get the ball rolling, though only figuratively speaking. On a state visit to England in the summer of 1877, Grant was persuaded to try the game, which had not yet made its way to the New World. He whiffed badly on his first swing and took only a huge divot on his second. Grant kept trying but seems to have abandoned the game without ever making successful contact.

Thus it fell to Taft, the most unlikely of athletes, to reign as founding member of the PGA: the Presidential Golfing Association. Taft never really wanted to be president and seemed to devote more energy to avoiding his official duties than to performing them. In this, the game was a great ally. "The beauty of golf to me is that you cannot play it if you permit yourself to think of anything else," he said.

Unfortunately, Taft's other escape was eating, which he did with at least as much gusto as he golfed. He stood 5'10" but swelled to 340 pounds while in office and once had to be pried from the White House bathtub. Just seeing the ball must have been a challenge for Taft, let alone finding a way to swing his arms around

the huge mound jutting out in front of him. He described his game as “bumble-puppy” golf, but never let high scores bother him. He played almost daily and was known for the huge grin he wore while walking the course.

Taft's successor, Woodrow Wilson, probably played more golf than any other president. Under orders from his personal physician, Dr. Cary Grayson, to seek fresh air and exercise, the frail Wilson played six mornings a week, usually in the company of Dr. Grayson. A cynic might accuse the good doctor of recommending that treatment in order to play golf every day, except that both men were bad enough golfers that their many rounds can not have brought them much gratification. Indeed, Wilson is a strong candidate for the title of worst presidential golfer. His average score was 115 and he once took 26 strokes to complete a par-4 hole and 15 putts on a single green. He thus edges his only real rival in ineptitude, Calvin Coolidge, who, according to the written history of the Burning Tree Country Club, once “pecked away 11 times” on a single hole before reaching the green.

Wilson referred to himself as the “crisis golfer.” Given how many hours our golfing presidents have spent on golf courses, it's no wonder a number of momentous events have transpired while the president was out playing. Wilson was on a golf course when news reached him of the sinking of the Lusitania. He immediately stopped playing. Six years later, when the papers putting an official end to World War I had finally been drawn up and required only a president's signature to become official, no one could find Warren G. Harding. Eventually located on a golf course, Harding was all but dragged to a nearby house where, still dressed for golf, he signed the papers then promptly raced back to his round. The end of the war was not going to spell the end of his game.

Clinton is the only president to claim to have lowered his handicap while in office (to 12?). Some reports suggest that Clinton is happy to take a mulligan here and there, and accepts “gimme” putts—echoes of Ike, who said that the toughest thing about leaving office was that “people don't give me as many short putts.” (Of course, by the standards of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, Clinton's

★Cubs Bail Out Harding★

He golfed as cameras rolled, to the disdain of American voters who in 1920 viewed golf largely as an elitist pursuit. To salvage his campaign, Warren G. Harding turned to the Chicago Cubs. ■ By David Sowell

In a smoke-filled room in Chicago's Blackstone Hotel on Michigan Avenue, a group of party bosses held a wee-hours-of-the-morning gathering during the 1920 Republican Convention. And a deal was cut that led to Warren G. Harding, a United States Senator from Ohio, being selected as the party's nominee for president.

Mere weeks after the convention, Harding's campaign was in a tailspin and an urgent call for assistance was placed to Chicago. Harding wasn't calling the party bosses; he was far beyond their help. He needed the Chicago Cubs!

Harding had ingested a huge dose of political poison; he had allowed himself to be filmed playing golf. When that footage rolled in newsreels at movie houses around the country, the negative reaction to it was devastating to his campaign.

In 1920, golf was very popular in certain pockets of the country, but its image with the overall population was extremely negative. This image problem was fueled greatly by the fact that two of the period's biggest icons, Teddy Roosevelt and Will Rogers, held the game in complete disdain.

Roosevelt had called golf “a game for snobs and dudes” and Rogers regularly lampooned golfers in his nationally syndicated newspaper column. To make the picture even bleaker for Harding, William Howard Taft had been the last Republican president, and the public's negative reaction to his frequent golfing had been widespread. When Taft sought reelection, he had gone down in flames.

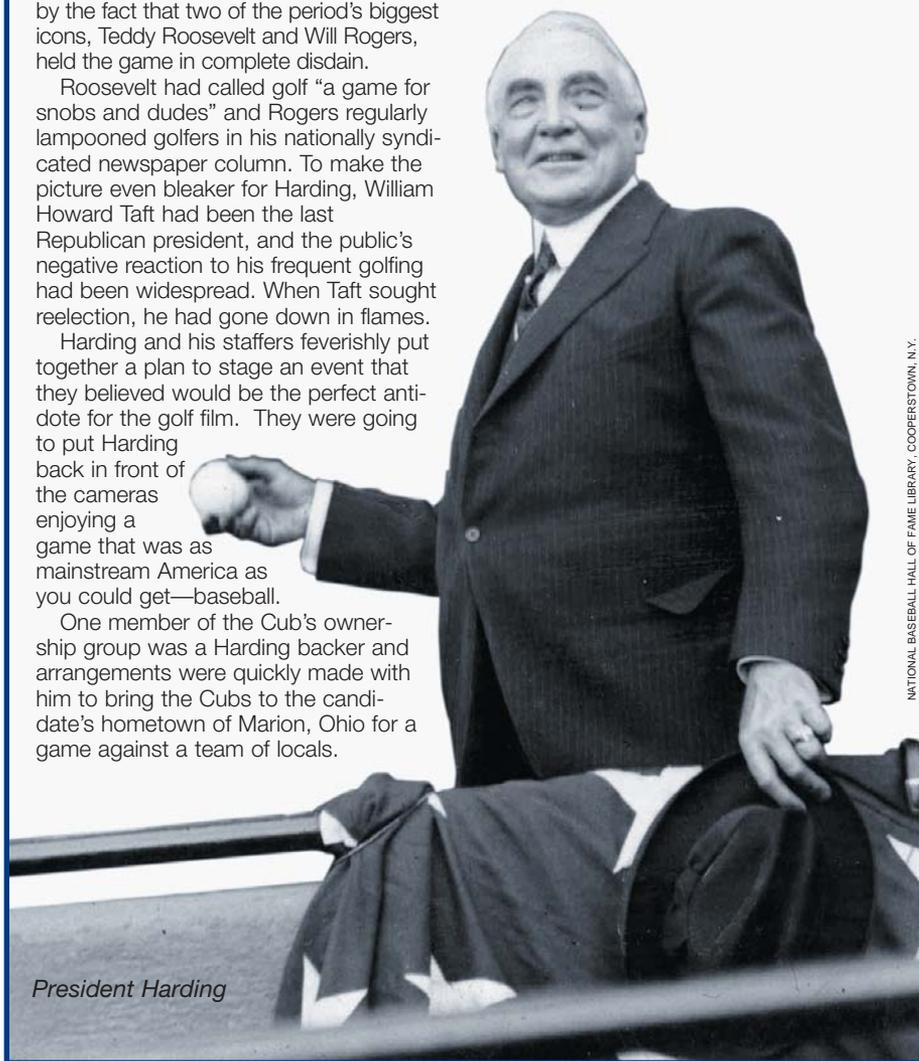
Harding and his staffers feverishly put together a plan to stage an event that they believed would be the perfect antidote for the golf film. They were going to put Harding back in front of the cameras enjoying a game that was as mainstream America as you could get—baseball.

One member of the Cub's ownership group was a Harding backer and arrangements were quickly made with him to bring the Cubs to the candidate's hometown of Marion, Ohio for a game against a team of locals.

On game day, Harding arrived at the packed ball park to a rousing welcome. With the cameras rolling, he went straight onto the field and warmed up the Cubs' ace pitcher, future Hall of Famer Grover Cleveland Alexander. After the warm-up session, Harding made a few brief remarks to the crowd, threw out the ceremonial first pitch, and then whooped it up in the grandstand like the contest was the seventh game of the World Series. The Cubs won the game 3-1, but Harding was the real winner. When this newsreel footage reached the theaters, the favorable reaction it received more than cancelled out his golfing gaffe.

Harding golfed in secret for the rest of the campaign and defeated his Democratic Party opponent, James Cox, by a huge margin. Shortly after the victory, Harding took off for a golf vacation in Florida. 🏌️

David Sowell is a South Carolina-based writer who has covered golf extensively.



President Harding

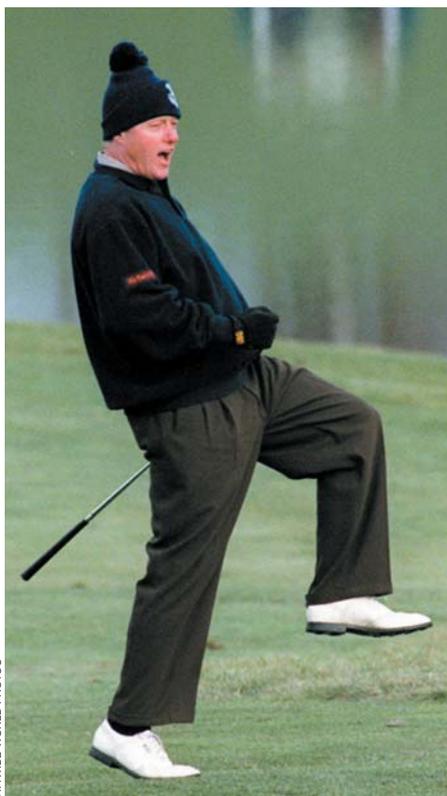
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(Clockwise from upper left) Nixon approached the game with grim determination; Ford honed his short game on the White House lawn; the Bushes' golfing bloodline runs deep; Clinton plays with exuberance.

breaches are minor. In 1994, reports emerged from the notoriously closed society that Kim had shot an astonishing 34 for an 18-hole round at the Pyongyang Golf Club, including five holes-in-one and an eagle 2 on the 400-yard par-4 first hole.) Lyndon Johnson was, if anything, even more generous towards himself than Clinton. But no one seemed to mind. Either Johnson was lucky enough to hold office in less vitriolic times or, more likely, because he never took his game seriously, no one else did either. It was not unusual for LBJ

to swing 300 times in a single round, but he rarely bothered to keep score. Golf, for LBJ, was just one more place to badger folks about legislation.

That brings us to our incumbent, George W. Bush, who comes from a richer golfing bloodline than any other president. The Bush family has produced four presidents, two of the United States and two of the USGA. George Herbert Walker, No. 41's maternal grandfather, started the Walker Cup competition in 1920, the year he served as president of the USGA. Fifteen years later, Senator Prescott Bush served as USGA president.

Those were some serious golfers. If there is a slight falling off in the current generation, surely it's due to their increased responsibility. Bush, No. 43, can drive the ball 250 yards and plays to a 15, but it's his brother Jeb, the Florida governor, who is the family's best golfer (though nowhere near as good as Bush 41's vice president, Dan Quayle, who played enough to get close to scratch).

For generations, the test for all Bush

golfers is Cape Arundel, a lovely little course a few minutes from the family compound in Kennebunkport, Me. There, they communicate in slang of their own devising ("wedge city" is a sand bunker, "power outage" a weak putt), while speeding around the course at velocities that might well prove fatal. The family record for a round at Cape Arundel is one hour and 42 minutes. "We're not good, but we're fast," chuckles Bush 41, who calls their speedy rounds "cart polo."

Lately, no one seems particularly troubled by Teddy Roosevelt's warning. Clinton reckons he played about 400 rounds in eight years, and both Bushes have given press conferences on the first tee. Apparently, golf need not be fatal to one's presidential aspirations. It's a far more mainstream sport than it ever was in 1908, and for that our golfing presidents deserve some of the credit. 🏌️

Merrell Noden is a New Jersey-based writer who has contributed to Sports Illustrated and Travel+Leisure Golf, among others.