



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Confessions of a Golf Luddite

Confessions of a Golf Luddite¹ **Report One**

April 3, 2007

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. I'm in Phoenix, Arizona, to watch my nephew Ronnie Black play in a golf tournament. Joining us is Ronnie's brother, James, who is Ronnie's caddy and coach for this week. James is the golf coach at New Mexico Junior College and has taken time from his job to advise Ronnie.

After competing 22 years on the Professional Golfers Association (PGA) tour, Ronnie laid-off professional golf for four years. He has decided to play on the Seniors Tour (formally called the Champions Tour), and will be eligible for play May 2008 (when he turns 50). Because he won two tournaments and made 320 cuts in tour events, Ronnie will be given his tour card without playing in qualifying rounds. He doesn't have a completely "free pass" as he must still contest for a place in an individual event, either with an exemption, a qualifying round, or by placing high in previous events. But his entry into the Seniors will be much easier than for most players, who must "qualify" to earn the right to contest for a slot in a tournament.

To prepare for this stage of his career, this spring Ronnie is playing in a series of eight tournaments. Each week, a golf club in the Phoenix area hosts a three-day tournament. This week, the Legend at Arrowhead Golf Club is the location for the contest.

It's a three-round tournament. All players play on Tuesday and Wednesday. The players who make the cut play on Thursday. The purse is modest when compared to a regular PGA event, such as the Pebble Beach Pro/Am. First prize is \$13,500. Second prize is \$6,750, and \$5,624 is awarded to the third place finisher.

I'm writing this report after having watched Ronnie play his first round, so my recount will be in the past tense. For now, I'll stay in the present tense as I make a few observations about golf and Ronnie.

My explanation of the golf played today will not be from the eyes of a golf expert. The game has so many facets and nuances, so many subtleties, that my explanations may come across as hackneyed and clichéd. But I hope they are correct. They will be written from the standpoint of a Sunday hacker, an approach most of my readers can relate to.

As usual, these reports are written in a light vein. I try to heed Mark Twain's warning to writers: "Life is too serious to write about it seriously." Hmm, that was not Twain. Maybe it was something Bob Dylan borrowed from a dead Civil War poet. No, it must have been anon. Anyway, my new readers have been warned.

Show me some Action!

Ronnie plays golf for a living. I don't, for obvious reasons. My buddies and I bet a modest amount on each hole, just to keep our interests aroused during 4.5 hours of mostly doing nothing

¹ Image on cover of broken tee is courtesy of Bing.com.

but looking for lost balls. Just consider: Hitting or putting a golf ball consumes about two seconds per stroke. Yet a round of golf takes about 16,200 seconds to play 18 holes. (60 sec. per min. x 60 min. per hour x 4.5 hours = 16,200 sec.)

Let's say I score 110 for a round. Thus, the *Ratio Of Time Spent Doing Something vs. Time Spent Doing Nothing* is: 220 : 16,200. A fine example of the Law of the Disproportionate Ratio.

Yes, I know. I'm exaggerating again. My golfing buddies and relatives---those who eat, breathe, sleep...and otherwise consume golf---have this retort, "Luddite! Those other 15,980 seconds are consumed in planning the next shot, and getting to the ball you just hit. Golf is contested in a area of thousands of yards. It takes time to traverse the golfing terrain. And it takes a lot of time to go through zillions of sagacious, metaphysical rules on how *not* to slice the upcoming shot. Wise up!"

To which I agree. I've been making jokes about the game. Truth is, I have never won one red penny playing against my buddies. They are not all that good at golf, yet they give me strokes on several holes and still take my money.

As you can see, I am a golfing luddite. Luddite, in the sense that I'm not confident nor competent with the machinery of golf: the club and the ball.

But my ignorance of the game does not diminish my appreciation of the game. I've qualms about how some folks praise golf as if it were a religion. But in the end, that's OK. We humans need something with which we can identify and keep us engaged. We need interesting subjects to feed our interest. No question, golf is an interesting subject.

The First Round

I have watched Ronnie play about 100 rounds of golf. During all of them, I was restricted to walking "outside the ropes." This barrier keeps the masses away from the players and also allows more people to see the golfers' shots. Today, the crowd consisted of yours truly and a few officials (See Figure 1). No ropes. No marshals to maintain order and keep people away from the players. Pretty much like an outing of my golfing buddies and me. Quiet. No one around to witness our slices.



Figure 1. No ropes. No galleries.

To give you an idea of the different world a pro golf player occupies in contrast to the Sunday morning hacker, listed below are a few confessions of a golf luddite:

- Ronnie and James talked about the selection of a medium iron (6 or 7) for a shot. For the same shot, my friends and I would pull out a fairway wood.
- Ronnie hits the ball with his driver so far *into* the fairway its landing is lost to the eye. We hit the ball with our driver so far *off* the fairway, its landing is lost to the eye.
- When necessary, Ronnie can strike the ball "fat" (behind the ball). We are content when we strike the ball---fat or lean.
- They discussed a putt that might have a one, or two ball break toward the hole. We would likely judge the same putt to have a one, or two club-length break.

I exaggerate, but not by much.

We'll walk through each hole of the first nine he played, then summarize the next nine. He played the back nine first. To set matters on the score today, Ronnie did not have a good round. He shot 77, five over par. He had six bogeys and one birdie. Here is his scorecard for the first round. Red numbers are bogeys; green numbers are birdies; black numbers are pars.

| Hole | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | Total |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-------|
| Par | 4 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 72 |
| Score | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 77 |

Number Ten (Par 5)

His tee shot landed to the far right of the fairway. Arriving at the scene after a walk of over 300 yards from the tee, I saw my two nephews and the two other players in the threesome looking for a lost ball. I saw Ronnie drop a ball and thus thought he had lost his ball. Then I learned his ball had stopped on the golf cart; thus, earning a free drop. His second shot was a slight hook and landed to the left of the green. But he chipped on and got down in two for a par.

Number Eleven (Par 4)

Another par. Another observation: All players landed their second shot within about five feet of the hole. When even one player in my threesome executes such a shot, it's cause for high-fives.

Number Twelve (Par 4)

Ronnie hit his drive to the right again. He didn't use enough club on his second shot, but was 15 feet from the pin. This shot would have been judged to be a successful strike of the ball by us Sunday golfers. Ronnie was displeased. He missed a short putt for his par. First bogey of the day.

Number Thirteen (Par 4)

Missed fairway. Still made par.

Number Fourteen (Par 3)

All three players missed the green from a 185-yard tee shot! Just like my threesome. Except for one small point. They recovered to make pars. We would have been happy as larks to recover for a bogey. Me? If I miss a par 3 green on my drive, I usually end up with a 5 or 6.

Number Fifteen (Par 4)

Ronnie hit a fairly straight tee shot, which I thought was a terrific strike. But he was not elated and James was not smiling. What was going on? I couldn't even see where the ball had landed. Shortly, after coming up to the landing, I discovered Ronnie had hit his tee shot 283 yards. At 49 years of age, he still hits a (good) tee shot well over 300 yards. James informed me Ronnie had not hit the ball "flush," which to golf luddites means the head of the club in relation to the ball and path-swing might have been off by .0000001 degrees.

What a precise game of golf is. Small wonder even the Tiger Woods of the world often miss the fairway. Surely, there must be some other way to practice self-abuse. Kick-boxing comes to mind. Maybe riding bulls in rodeos.

Number Sixteen (Par 3)

On this short par 3 (169 yards), all players hit their tee shots onto the green. All made pars.

Number Seventeen (Par 4)

Ronnie pared this hole after hitting his drive about 325 yards---which is not his maximum distance. I'm a short hitter. A drive of 200 yards leaves me fulfilled, certain the stars are aligned in the heavens, and I'm aligned with the cosmos...if only until the next shot. I asked James,

- "If you were asked to name one thing in a swing that leads to distance, what would it be?"
- "Flexibility."
- Not the answer I had expected. But what did I expect? Obviously, I didn't know, as I had never hit a ball of any consequential distance. James went on to explain that *flexibility led to a full shoulder turn. He then talked about a stable platform, with the right side of the body (and especially the right leg) providing such a platform. Then, he went on to say that this flexibility, coupled with a stable platform and a full shoulder turn, in harmony with tense muscles alongside the side of the body---as well as part of the back---would generate torque...Thus leading to 300-yard drives.*
- And I thought, *Yes, as well as hitting the ball flush,*
 - *and proper weighting and unweighting,*
 - *and not leaning over too much but not leaning over too little,*
 - *and not rotating the hips too much but rotating them some,*
 - *and getting the hips out of the way on the downswing, but not getting them out of the way too much,*
 - *and not gripping the club too tightly, but not griping it too loosely,*
 - *and placing the two hands on the club in such a way that one does not have too strong a grip nor too weak,*
 - *and keeping the left arm straight, but not too rigid,*

- *and preventing the right elbow from flying out from the body like a wounded chicken,*
 - *and keeping the top part of the left arm tucked into its adjacent armpit---such that a glove will never fall to the ground during the backswing,*
 - *and watching the ball,*
 - *and tucking one's left shoulder somewhat under one's chin during the backswing,*
 - *and continuing the path of the club straight down the line of the desired flight for as long as possible,*
 - *and not hitting the ball itself but hitting through the ball,*
 - *and keeping the weight of one's feet on the inside of said feet,*
 - *and finishing the swing high but not too high,*
 - *...and watching the ball take a 90 degree turn into the already battered side of a house on the right side of the fairway.*
- It's easy. Look at that Ben Hogan photo.
 - "Thanks for the hint, James. I'll work on being more flexible. Glad to hear such simple news---especially because I have the flexibility of a 67-year old pretzel. ...But I have to start somewhere to get that distance."

Number Eighteen (Par 5)

One of many traits separating the men from the boys, and the women from the girls on the golf course, one that separates the folks who actually play golf from those who simulate playing the game is the ability to recover from a poor shot. For a really talented player, it's the ability to save par. For me, it's the ability to save double bogey. On a par 5, an errant drive is almost a guarantee I'll get the dreaded snowman entry on my score card...as in 8. And to drive the ball into a water hazard means the ball is declared lost. You may retrieve it if you wish, but the rules say it's as good as gone. For me, a lost ball is a lost cause. I just don't know how to recover, other than heading for the 19th hole.

Ronnie put his drive from the 18th tee (530 yards to the hole) into water on the right side of the fairway. As seen in the left photo of Figure 2, he had to drop a ball. So, he was lying 2 and hitting 3. You're welcome...and it took a bit of training on my part to come to understand that hitting the ball into the water incurs a one-stroke penalty.

The rules on where and how to drop this ball put the Federal Tax Code to shame: Where its supposed path was upon leaving the air space just above the boundary of terra firma and H₂O; where the drop is executed in relation to the distance from the water; what happens if the ball rolls back into the water, etc.

After the drop, the right photo in Figure 2 shows Ronnie's view toward the green. In case you can't see it, I've placed a red line showing a rough line of flight from the ball to the green. Ronnie was hitting the ball from a slope, always a tricky shot---even for a pro. He was hitting over trees, over hard ground. The green was surrounded by sand traps. He shot landed in one of the traps (on the left, shown with a red X).



Figure 2. Lost ball...lost cause?



Lying 3, hitting 4. Water ball. Ball in a sand trap. What else could happen? Oh, not much. A routine shot out of the trap. A routine (long) putt to save par. His playing of this hole is one more example of the skill separating the men from the boys and the women from the girls on the links.

The Front Nine

Ronnie played the front nine last. As you can see from the scorecard, he did not score well. After watching a while, I asked James his impression of his swing. James said he was not finishing his swing, which my brother Tom tells me means he was not following through with his shot. I can relate this idea to a tennis stroke, as I often do not follow through, but try to guide the shot. Without exception, it does not work.

On hole # 3, Ronnie put his drive into a fairway bunker, as seen in Figure 3. The lip of the bunker is higher than it appears in this picture. Ronnie chose an 8 iron for the shot to the pin, about 150 yards away. He told me later he hit behind the ball to make sure he got it over the lip. The ball landed just short of the green, as seen in Figure 3, but he was unable to save par.



Figure 3. In and out of the bunker.

On #7 (392 yards), Ronnie used a 3 wood off the tee. He hit it beautifully, down the middle and (to me) out of sight. After walking off his distance to the pin (79 yards), my math revealed a 49 year old man hit a 3 wood 323 yards. In my Walter Mitty dreams!

At my first opportunity, I'm headed for the practice tee. First, I will think about James' comments on flexibility being key to hitting my tee shot past the ladies' tee box. Second, I will limber up my pretzel-like torso. Then, keeping in mind the third, fourth, fifth...through infinity secrets to a golf swing, I will try not to miss the ball with my club.

But first, let's see how Ronnie does tomorrow. He was not happy about his round today. I left him to his misery and some coaching from James. For Ronnie's sake, I was not happy either. But my walk was not entirely spoiled as I was not playing this crazy game.

Confessions of a Golf Luddite Report Two

April 4, 2007

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter, who is in Phoenix, Arizona, to watch nephew Ronnie Black play in a golf tournament. I am pleased to report he shot five under par today. I counted six putts that missed the hole by less than two inches. Putting was a big part of the challenge for today, as well as yesterday. The greens were very slow and did not putt true (they were bumpy). Nonetheless, 67 was a great improvement over yesterday's 77.

James, Ronnie's coach yesterday, was not present today. He flew back to New Mexico to coach his college team. Thus, Ronnie and I shared a golf cart during the round. I mentioned to Ronnie that I had never walked (or rode) with him on a round of golf; much less tournament golf; much less one-on-one with only he and I involved. We've spent many hours together, especially during the Kempers in Virginia, a couple of Masters...and quite a few Las Vegas, California, Williamsburg, and Florida outings---but in the company of others.

He informed me no one else had shared this experience. He plays rounds with friends and relatives, but he said he had never had a companion with him during a tournament in which he explained his club selection, the strategy for a shot, and the outcome. He was subjected to over four hours of explaining Golfing 101 to a neophyte...and still shot five under par.

I was careful not to intrude on his concentration and become an imposition. I hope I was successful. Anyway, he told me he enjoyed explaining what he was planning on doing and what he had done. He was patient with my questions and articulate in providing tutorials on his game executions.

When you think about it, the idea is pretty weird. A professional golfer is in a tournament for a lot of money. Tagging along is a golfing luddite, to whom the golfer explains every shot. Cool stuff from a cool man who did it with grace. What is more, today was the most enjoyable 18 holes of golf I have ever experienced, including the ones I've played. ...Especially, the ones I've played.

Let's take a look at Ronnie's round. We start with his scorecard:

| Hole | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | Total |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-------|
| Par | 4 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 72 |
| Score | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 67 |

No red numbers. A bogey-free round, equivalent to your Reporter carding a triple-bogey-free round. He started the day on the front nine with two successive birdies. Of the 14 fairways (par 3s don't count), he hit ten of them. We'll spend time on each hole of the front nine, and summarize the back nine.

Number One (Par 4)

A three wood off the tee split the middle of the fairway for 270 yards. The second shot was 126 yards out, and he hit it to about 8 feet from the hole. A one-putt green for a birdie. That's the start we wanted. After the hole, Ronnie said, "I've already hit better fairway shots than I did yesterday." Ha!...and true.

Number Two (Par 5)

Oh no. The tee shot on # One looked like his coaching session with James after yesterday's round had fixed the kinks in his swing. But he hit this drive well to the right. In bounds, but barely. He offered, "I'm in my element. I'm in trouble." Ronnie has always had a good wit about him.

His second shot was very difficult. Figure 4 is a rough drawing I made to help explain the situation. His ball rested behind a tree with overhanging branches. Thus, he had no straight shot to the pin. Ronnie stood behind the ball briefly and announced to his uncle, "I need to curve it."

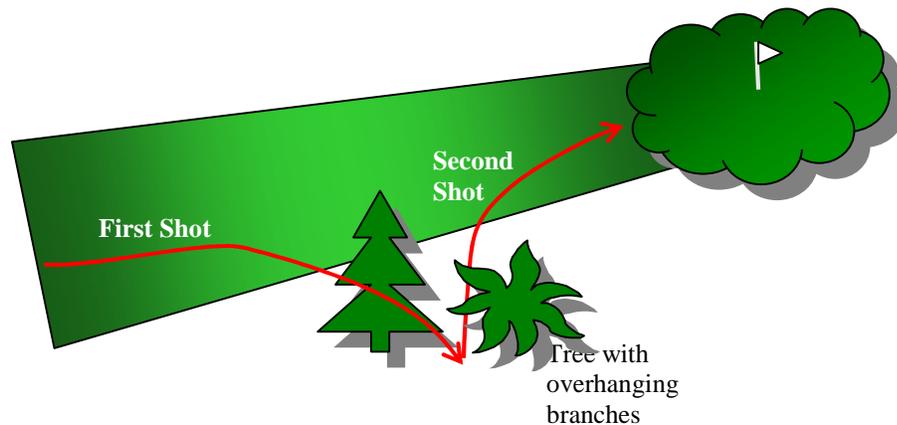


Figure 4. My kind of shot!

I stood beside him and silently said, *RB, I wish I could take this shot for you. It's a slice---in my game, the natural order of life on the links.* Of course, on the occasion when I actually need to hit a slice, I end up hooking the ball. Which leads to another observation:

My hitting the golf ball, its flight off my club head, and the location of its landing is no more predictable than using a random number generator to gauge where it will finally rest. And that is one of the most frustrating aspects of this game, at least for me: Directing the ball toward the hole is akin to playing Lotto.

Not for Ronnie. His second shot with a four iron knocked the ball under the branches, then "sliced" it to the middle of the fairway, just next to the green. Lying 2, hitting 3. He missed an eagle putt of 22 feet by one inch. Tapped it in for a birdie. Hot damn, this is fun!

Number Three (Par 4)

Ronnie's drive was straight down the middle of the fairway. He hit it 313 yards. After striking his second shot to about 12 feet from the flag, he told me, "I pulled it." Still he was close to the hole...after all, he was on the green. So, a two-putt for a par.

Number Four (Par 3)

For this 165-yard hole, Ronnie selected an 8 iron. He hit it short and to the right, off the green by quite a ways. His pitch-and-run got caught up in the fringe grass, which slowed the ball down. He saved par with a six-foot putt.

Stop Moving! I was careful to stay out of the way during the action. I would assess Ronnie's position on the fairway, or judge the break for his putt only if I did not impede a player's work. Even then, on two occasions I moved around on the fairway when a player was behind us setting up a shot. Yes, behind us. The threesome played in such a way that a player would go in front of another player to set up his shot. The front player would then wait for the man behind to strike his ball. I was not accustomed to being in front of someone hitting a ball in my general direction.

The reason for my caution is obvious: love of life and limb. No way will I place myself in front of my buddies' fairway shot, especially if they are using a long iron. I may be nonchalant about the game of golf, but I'm not nonchalant about deep bruises and concussions to my body and head.

Wasted Energy. It was about this time in the round that I began to take notice of a player's ill-temper. I won't dwell on this incident, but some observations are in order. He was missing a lot of putts, some going by the hole as if he were putting at Augusta---and these greens were very slow. Truth is, even I could see (after watching him for 22 holes) that he had serious shortcomings in his short game. Anyway, hereafter, at almost each hole he threw a club or banged his club head into the ground.

On one occasion, he rammed his putter head into the turf of a green. I watched him attempt to repair a very large ball mark, and said to myself, *This man will most likely never make it big-time. He's angry about his own ineptitude! How self-defeating is that? Why take out his clumsiness on mother earth and his playing partners?*

Ronnie had a very poor round yesterday. Yet, not once did he assault the grass with his golf club; nor did he toss clubs around. Winning or losing, the man shows class on the links. If he didn't, regardless of his blood relationship with your Reporter, I wouldn't bother with the man. But that's how I feel about anyone who is on the field of competition: You bang or throw a tennis racket because you miss a shot---a shot I made with the intention of you missing it? OK, maybe one time. You do it twice? Find yourself someone else to play with. Life is much too short to waste it on petulant people.

Back to the action. On this hole (# 4), I had a chance to read Ronnie's putt.

- Afterwards I asked, "Ronnie, looked like a two-ball break to the right. What did it do?"
- He said, "Straight as an arrow."

- So much for my ability to read a break, and I consider reading breaks to be one of the few positive attributes of my game.

Number Five (Par 4)

Three wood down the middle. Seven iron to the pin. Two putts. Par. After the hole was played, and we were heading for # six:

Ronnie, "Another perfect putt. Just slipped by."

"Yep. No more than an inch."

"Yeah... ." ...pause... ." Good way to make a living, eh Uyless?"

"No kidding. Thousands of people would trade places with you."

"Yep."

"You've lived a pretty glamorous life."

"Yes, I have."

Number Six (Par 5)

Number six was set up for this tournament as a 529-yard hole. As seen in Figure 5, water hazards were to the right of the fairway and around two sides of the green. Ronnie's drive ended-up on a slope. Bad luck for a good strike. He decided to use a four iron, and take the ball over the water, as shown by the red line in the Figure 5. Result: On the green. And a two-putt for a birdie.

Question: How could golf be so much fun? Answer: I was not playing.

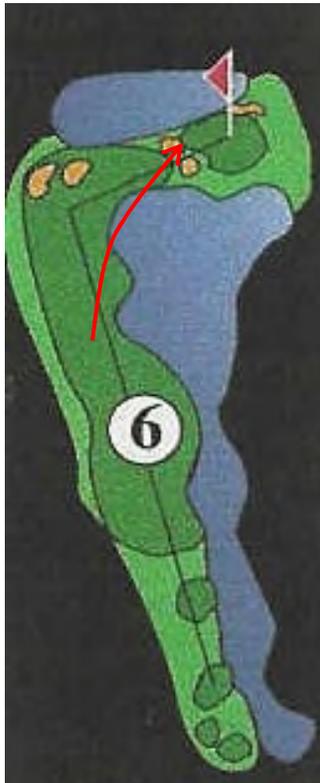


Figure 5. Second shot on six.

Number Seven (Par 4)

For the second time in a row, Ronnie hit a fine tee shot resulting in an unfortunate lie. His ball came to rest in a divot on a down slope. He recovered to make green in regulation, but his putt for a birdie was short. He tapped-in for a par.

- Reporter, "Boy, are the greens slow."
- Ronnie, "Yes, but by now, I know that. And I knew the shade of the grass indicated a slower roll. You've gotta figure that out."
- ...*Whatever you say Ronnie...*

Number Eight (Par 3)

Ronnie debated about the club selection for this 206 yard par 3 hole. His choice (and swing) was right-on: 15 feet to the pin. A dead-center putt for another birdie. On our way to the tee for the nine hole, he offered, "It would have gone into a hole this size," as he showed me a thumb and forefinger circle the size of a golf ball. As we say in basketball: Net only!

Number Nine (Par 4)

I thought Ronnie hit a good tee shot. But then, all of Ronnie's tee shots appear "good" to me, even the ones that damage nearby real estate. On this shot, he hit the fairway. But he told me:

- "Not a good hit.
- "You're joking with me."
- "No, too far back."
- The second shot was 179 yards to the pin. He used a six iron. He offered,
- "Good result. Not a real good swing...pulled it a bit."
- This shot was short. But he still made par.

The Back Nine and the Cut

As we did yesterday, I won't go into detail of each hole and shot. I've highlighted Ronnie's front nine. For the back nine, he birdied number 10 and pared the other eight holes. His drive on # 15 was 340 yards! After inspecting the drives of the three pros, Ronnie joked, "An old man can still out-drive two youngsters."

No, my friend. You are not old. Being old is determined by how a person acts, behaves, and performs. A 340-yard drive is not an old man shot.

Anyway, Ronnie missed the cut by one stroke. Coming to the 18th tee, he thought he had to eagle this par five hole to make the cut. So he let it all hang out.

He missed the fairway on his tee shot, only one of four times today. With an okay lie, and 272 yards to the flag, he hit his 3 wood straight toward the flag. The ball was on its way onto the green until it hit an obstruction (a mis-repaired divot, a piece of bark, Mother Nature's repositories...who knows?) and bounced into a sand trap. Ronnie made a par.

Thus, he missed the cut on the third tournament of this eight tournament series. He's been in the money for the first two tourneys. So, he's doing fine. Just needs to keep making those cuts.

Hereafter, I'll not be reporting to this level of detail on Ronnie's efforts to play on the Champions Tour. At least for a while. We've visits to make to other venues. I've promised a report to you on President Reagan's digs. It's coming shortly.

To close, I hope you enjoyed reading this report. After watching Ronnie play this week, I'm inspired to aspire to the game, if only in my head. I'm told that is where the game is really played, in the head. I'm told the rest is secondary.

Maybe. Now, if we can just pause a moment and think about torque, stance, grip, turn...and 10¹⁰ other secrets to the golf swing, perhaps we can say it also deals with muscle memory. That is, practice. See you later...I'm headed for the driving range.