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CAN'T GOLF SWING TOO?

by Scott Cohen

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Robin Holland for The New York Times

Artists/golfers like these — from left, Dike Blair, Donald Sultan and James Rizzi — give greens a whole new meaning.

Can't Golf Swing Too?

By SCOTT COHEN

Golf is supposed to be so square, why are so many rock musicians, actors, artists and writers on the courses? For some, it's the green expanse and the chance to ride a golf cart through it. For others, it's the irony of a young, urban hipster playing what's perceived as an old Republican sport. Then there are those who throw their ball into the woods for the thrill of finding it.

Golf is very much part of the lives of the artists James Rizzi, Dike Blair and Donald Sultan. The three were about to tee off one bright day at the Noyac Golf and Country Club near Sag Harbor. The first tee looked out toward a large green and two noticeable sand traps, one to the left of the fairway, the other to the right of the green.

Mr. Rizzi, 43, considers himself an urban primitive. His three-dimensional prints are sold in more than 200 galleries worldwide. His towering drive gently tumbled down to the center

of the fairway. Mr. Blair, 42, a painter who works in various media, will be co-curator this fall of "Winter of Love," a multimedia show on sex and love in the 90's, at P.S. 1 in Long Island City, Queens. He sent a low screacher to the right of Mr. Rizzi's ball. Mr. Sultan, 43, a painter, will have his next show in Budapest in October. His tee shot hooked into the trees.

MR. RIZZI There's nothing like coming off the first tee after you've hit a good shot. You always feel a little nervous, especially when people anxious to play are backed up on the first tee.

MR. SULTAN I've actually swung and missed the ball, swung again and knocked one into the woods, then hit one sideways where the other people were standing, all on the first tee. Finally I threw a ball down and started from there.

SECOND HOLE

478-yard par 5, narrow fairway, traps right, trouble left.

MR. RIZZI Art to me is like breathing, while golf is



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frustrating. I started playing 13 years ago, when I turned 30. I started drawing my second year in college. I was a business major. I took one drawing course and that was it.

When did you turn pro?

MR. RIZZI The day I graduated college. I sat on street corners in front of museums and decided I wanted to make a living at this right away.

THIRD HOLE

365-yard par 4, downhill-uphill, valley in the middle, traps on either side.

MR. BLAIR A round of golf resembles "The Voyage of Life," the allegorical paintings by the 19th-century American artist Thomas Cole. You start out so enthusiastic on Hole 1, you get beaten down by the middle numbers and finally you reconcile your 105 score by the last three holes.

Why did you take it up?

MR. BLAIR My parents made me. It's a terrible sport for kids. I loathed it and quit as soon as I could. Then, about 15 years ago, I realized it was interesting to play, but I haven't played in three years. I find it terribly time-consuming and addictive. If I don't play in a given year I'm happy, because if I play once, I get the bug. I hope this doesn't get me playing again. So far, nothing in this round is encouraging me to take up the sticks.

Ever play a course with topless caddies?

MR. BLAIR I already have enough problems out on the course.

FOURTH HOLE

359-yard par 4, severe dogleg right. Tee shot must carry trap at the turn.

MR. SULTAN I used to caddie when I was a kid in Asheville. Heavy bags. And these were the mountains. They used to load you up: two bags, \$5 a bag, 18 holes. I felt like a Sherpa. The bag I'm using now is my father's. It's very similar to ones I lugged. They looked like big, colorful pro bags.

Which paint company logo would you want on yours?

MR. SULTAN Rembrandt. Winsor & Newton isn't bad either, if you're playing a WASP course.

MR. RIZZI I want Liquitex on mine.

FIFTH HOLE

213-yard par 3, water between tee and fairway; large, two-tiered green surrounded by even larger trees.

MR. SULTAN I also worked on a lot of summer tour shows as a kid, so I know the words to every musical. I was singing in the chorus, dancing, painting sets, building props. My father was a painter, but I always thought I was going to be in the theater. I was a Tarheel — North Carolina is the Tarheel State. I guess that's why I paint with tar and smoke a lot.

SIXTH HOLE

357-yard par 4, water to the left that shouldn't come to play but does the moment you know it's there.

MR. BLAIR I could probably knock the cover off the ball. He signed his painting with a big O.K. He did a lot of self-portraits, and he wasn't a good-looking man.

MR. BLAIR The late Milton Avery probably would have had a very good touch around the greens. I always think the great haystack painter Martin Johnson Heade would have been an excellent, although tortured, golfer. His paintings remind me of golf courses. There's an almost architectural dryness to his treatment of the landscape, a kind of still tension and mystery that's like looking at a hole from a tee. It's fraught with the possibilities of fulfillment or disaster, so the landscape vibrates when you look at it.

Who wouldn't you want to play with?

MR. RIZZI Seurat — he'd be too slow. He drove people crazy, he was so obsessed.

SEVENTH HOLE

377-yard par 4, dogleg right, sand trap at the turn.

Which golfers would make great painters?

MR. BLAIR The more gregarious ones, like Chi Chi Rodriguez. The others are simply too impenetrable to know whether they'd be good or bad.

MR. RIZZI Chi Chi's the golfer I'd want to caddie for me. No matter what you're doing, even if you're hacking, he would help you.

EIGHTH HOLE

153-yard par 3, surrounded by traps in the front that you must carry or else go home.

Which course would you like to sneak onto?

MR. RIZZI Augusta, where the Masters is played. It's by far the most beautiful course in the world.

MR. BLAIR I'd like to play the courses at Disney World. No, they're not giant miniature golf courses, unfortunately.

Which gallery would you like to have snuck your works into?

MR. SULTAN Kahnweiler in Paris; that was Picasso's dealer in 1910.

NINTH HOLE

470-yard par 5, rolling fairway punctuated by deep traps. Whoever designed the cyclone at Coney Island must have designed this hole.

MR. BLAIR I have been interested in making work that is centered on leisure activity and pleasure, a subject that has pretty much excited art this century. Rather than focusing on angst, it's interesting to focus on leisure and pleasure and beauty.

TENTH HOLE

407-yard par 4, narrow fairway leading to a two-tier green, woods on all sides.

What's more angst-ridden than golf?

MR. BLAIR Well, when I've painted golf courses, they're empty, like sci-fi writer J. G. Ballard's drained swimming pools. The empty golf course is at once loaded with possible action, sadness, angst and beauty.

ELEVENTH HOLE

307-yard par 4, a simple short dogleg

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Check Out the First Tee

Which threesome would you like to join?

MR. BLAIR Iggy Pop (he'd look good in a tight golf shirt and probably hits the ball a mile); Stephen Jay Gould (he's a Darwinian biologist, and he'd be looking at bugs on the green instead of worrying about his putt); the late S. J. Perelman (his conversation would be excellent, and we'd be able to have sidecars at the 19th hole).

TWELFTH HOLE

197-yard par 3, uphill, against the wind, traps left and right.

MR. RIZZI I'd love to have played Augusta with Eisenhower because of the Eisenhower tree in the middle of the fairway that he wanted to chop down. Pros just blast over that tree and it doesn't affect their game, but at his age, it was just where his ball would land. Also, he had a house, the only house, I believe, right on the course.

THIRTEENTH HOLE

348-yard par 4 dogleg left, steep hill on the right, traps on either side of the turn, trees left and right.

MR. SULTAN (having hooked his ball into the trees): I'm like a dog. I always go to the trees.

How do you get out?

MR. SULTAN Cheat.

If you designed this course, what would you leave and what would you take out?

MR. SULTAN Well, I'd add a lot more forgiveness and maybe keep the woods, but use thinner trees.

ninth tee, to call the clubhouse and order lunch so it's ready to pick up on the way to the 10th tee. It wouldn't be terrible to have a wet bar at each tee either.

What's your favorite water hole?

MR. SULTAN Probably the Odeon.

FOURTEENTH HOLE

458-yard par 5. Huge bunkers, hidden behind the rise, come into play on the second shot.

What about phones on the course to call 911, in case of a golf emergency?

MR. RIZZI Oh, yes, especially on the second shot of this hole. It's hard for people to take out an 8-iron on the second shot and lay up, but if you try to go for the green, you're going to be in one of those huge bunkers. Also, on No. 17 that runs along the driving range, if your ball goes down there, forget it. You can't tell it from the thousands of range balls.

FIFTEENTH HOLE

393-yard par 4, fairway slopes left so you want to hit right.

Where did you get the knitted covers for your woods?

MR. SULTAN I went to the cover shop on Madison Avenue. I bought the first socks I saw: blue wool, with red and white argyle, and pompons.

If you were commissioned to do the flags, what would you do?

MR. SULTAN I'd make them dominoes.

SIXTEENTH HOLE

181-yard par 3, huge green guarded by huge traps.

MR. RIZZI Golf is an impossible game to perfect. If they did, they would have 18 birdies in a row. It's a rare thing, but a pitcher can pitch a perfect game, but no golfer in the history of the sport has even birdied 18 holes. They've parred the course, but par's supposed to be normal. Perfection is doing one under par.

SEVENTEENTH HOLE

460-yard par 5, narrow fairway, driving range to the right.

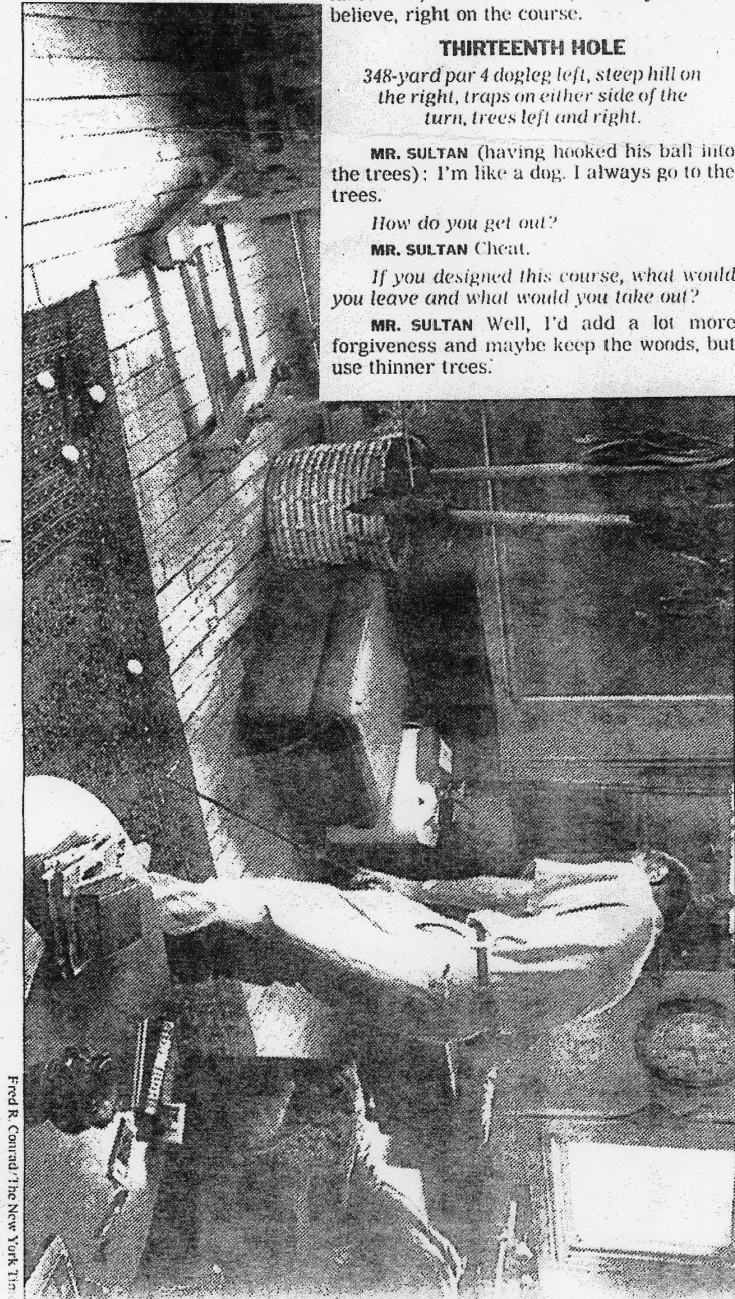
MR. SULTAN It's the competitive thing that I don't like. People who are competitive usually cheat. The game is about companionship and playing against a course. I have played with people where I get on the green and get in the cup and the other people are in the woods or in the water or all over the place and they always end up with one stroke less than I got.

EIGHTEENTH HOLE

433-yard par 4, dogleg right. Fairway slopes right, down to the trees and the driving range below.

MR. BLAIR It will be interesting to see if there's a snow-boarding equivalent that happens in golf, like with skiing, where you use different equipment on the same field and completely drive old hackers nuts. Maybe it will be a one-club sport that will reward speed and agility, and the clothes would be suitably wild.

James Rizzi, shown at putting practice in his Manhattan studio, says, "Art to me is like breathing, while golf is so frustrating."



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times