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## **MEDICAL MULLIGANS™** *Views and insights on Golf & Medicine*

**By Andy Dombro, MD**  
*Physician & Student of Golf*

*[As seen in regional & national  
golf publications coast to coast]*

### **TAKE A HIKE**

AFTER STRUGGLING HIS WAY onto the PGA TOUR several years ago, a young professional golfer named Casey Martin made his widely publicized case for being able to use a cart rather than walk while playing in tour events. As you likely recall, his plea met with a great amount of resistance and criticism, particularly from PGA Tour members, both past and present, and the case eventually went to the Supreme Court.

I'm certain that Casey would have relished the ability to walk the course like his fellow competitors if he could have done so in a pain-free manner. Casey is afflicted with a circulatory disorder in his leg called *Klippel-Trenaunay-Weber Syndrome*, also known as *Parkes Weber Syndrome*, causing severe pain and withering of the affected leg.

One of the arguments used against him was that walking is a "core element" of the game – without it, one is actually not playing the same game as one who walks. The other was that his ability to ride in a cart rather than walk the course like everyone else, particularly on hot and humid days, would create an unfair advantage for him via a less fatigue.

Eventually, the Supreme Court upheld Martin's request. He was allowed to ride in a cart for all PGA Tour events that year. By season's end, though, he unfortunately found himself outside the top 125 money earners and lost his PGA Tour card. The "unfair advantage" didn't seem to be much of an advantage after all.

While there *is* a case to be made that walking is at the heart of golf, the reality is that droves of golfers make the choice to ride every day. In fact, many of the new "resort style" courses seem to cater much more so to riders than walkers, featuring both mandatory cart rules and/or relatively long distances from the green to the next tee box, making it difficult to walk even if it *is* an option!

It seems that any advantage a golfer who rides may have, via decreased fatigue or otherwise, is more than offset by additional factors that favor the walker. For me, many of my best rounds have come on days when I chose to walk. And, I'm referring not just to my lowest scores, but also my most enjoyable rounds. When I walk, I feel as though it's much easier to get into the flow of the game. It gives me much more time between shots to better enjoy my surroundings as well as my playing partners, and creates improved concentration and visualization of my shots.

But if that's not enough of a reason to walk the course, then consider the many medical and health benefits attained by doing so. While you are probably intuitively aware of some of these, others are likely more unfamiliar and surprising. We have all heard, for instance, that regular *aerobic* exercise (sustained and rhythmic), like walking, is good for one's overall cardiovascular health, but there are many other benefits to this type of exercise as well.

Several recent medical studies show that people who engage in regular exercise can literally add years to their lives – up to three, to be exact! This can be true even with something as simple as a brisk walk for a half-hour each day. In fact, regular exercise may have quite a profound effect on the *quality* of your life, as well.

Specifically, some of the proven medical benefits a person can expect to derive from regular aerobic exercise are:

- Prevention or reduction of high blood pressure
- Increased likelihood of quitting or reducing your smoking
- Prevention of type 2 diabetes or decrease in your need for medicines if you have diabetes
- Prevention of obesity and improved maintenance of ideal weight
- Improved lipid (cholesterol) profile, and therefore reduced plaque build-up in your arteries and reduced risk of heart attack
- Prevention of osteoporosis, especially when combined with strength training
- Reduced chronic pain, including back pain from arthritis and other causes
- Reduction in cancer risk, including colon, prostate, uterus, and breast
- Prevention of strokes
- Improvement on muscle strength and function

In addition to the above physical benefits of regular exercise/walking, there are also a variety of *mental and emotional* benefits to be had. Exercise helps fight depression as well as boost self-esteem, by activating and synchronizing certain chemicals in your brain, such as *serotonin* and *norepinephrine*. What's more, it can help elevate your mood and feelings of well-being through the release of *endorphins*, "nature's opiate," which also help relieve pain and stress. This occurs after as little as a few minutes of moderate exercise, and lasts long after you're done. Also, in a recent medical study, regular exercise was found to improve cognition and thought processes in middle-aged people. Finally, regular exercise can even help improve your sleep patterns.

A commitment to walk the course is a great resolution to make at any time of the year. But, before starting to do so, particularly if it's been some time since you have engaged in physical activity or have chronic medical issues, talk to your doctor first. Use common sense, easing into it "a step at a time." You can start by simply parking your cart further from your ball, gradually increasing your stamina until you're walking every other hole, and eventually nine or eighteen holes. And, remember to invest in a comfortable, well-fitting pair of shoes. This may be one of the most important things you can do.

Although Mark Twain called golf "a good walk spoiled," it is in fact a great excuse to go take a walk. It will not only help you live longer, but also better, while also increasing your enjoyment of the game. So go take a hike – it might even help shave a few strokes off your scores!

