

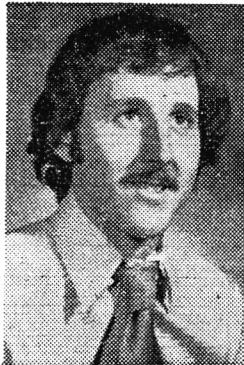
Rick Warner

Teeing off on Jerry Ford and friends

With all the talk these days about the cheapening of great sports events, I was naturally heartened to read about the "Jerry Ford Invitational golf tournament."

Now here is a sports event that promises to be a classic.

We learn in a press handout from Michelob, the sponsor of the pro-am, that when the Jerry Ford Invitational begins today in Vail, Colorado, it will feature "one of the most glamorous golf fields ever assembled."



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Hale Irwin, Hubert Green and Jerry Pate will be there, we are told. But that isn't all. Also coming are Ed Sneed, Dale Douglass, Miller Barber and other golf legends.

On the celebrity side, we are tantalized by a number of names that are virtually synonymous with golf. George C.

Scott, Don Meredith, Burt Lancaster, Tip O'Neill, Melvin Laird. The latter two are respectively identified as House Speaker and former Defense Secretary, in case we forgot.

Nobody has to remind us who Jerry Ford is. He's the guy Chevy Chase used to imitate on TV. Sometimes, he would do his own standup act. Like the time he told us how free everybody in Eastern Europe is. He used to bump his head a lot and hit people with golf balls. They could have used the helmet he played football too many times without.

Save a condo

Lest we get too giddy, the nice people from Michelob remind us that the Jerry Ford Invitational is played for the benefit of charity. The charities are all located in Vail, a chic ski-resort town. I think this is all well and good and befitting a great sports event. Maybe some of the proceeds can help a destitute family keep its condominium in shape.

Some may think it wrong for a politician to put his name on a golf tournament. But they are of the old school which believes sports and politics don't mix, when the opposite is obviously the case. Sports figures dabble with increasing success in politics (as Bill Bradley and Jack Kemp will attest) so why shouldn't politicians dabble in sports?

In this spirit, I offer these golf events of the future:

- The Bert Lance Savings and Loan Classic — This tournament, played on consecutive days in Washington, D.C., and Atlanta, offers the richest purse in golf. The sponsor spares no expense in providing the golfers with the finest playing conditions and accommodations on the tour. Each player is issued an unlimited checking account with National Bank of Georgia, good for the length of the tournament. The winner's check has been known to bounce.

- The Sadat-Begin West Bank Invitational — Played annually at a site chosen by the U.N., this event attracts only very serious golfers. In the past, play has been interrupted by sporadic gunfire and kidnapping of the 36-hole leader. The tournament has been criticized for its confusing out-of-bounds markers and its format, which requires mediators in place of caddies. Camp David is being considered as a permanent site.

- The Jerry Brown Miniature Golf Open — This is the tournament, according to its namesake, that "scales golf down to a reasonable and cost-effective size." Played on the scenic Sacramento municipal Putt-Putt course, the event is traditionally played while the governor is out of state. The winner receives no money, but does get a free Linda Ronstadt album.

Nice retreat

- The Shah's Tournament of Exiles — Held last year in Monte Carlo, this glamorous competition moves each year to a new international resort. Celebrities on hand in recent years have included President Thieu and Idi Amin. President Somoza of Nicaragua reportedly may attend this year's tournament. The comradery here is unique on the circuit. So are the between rounds poker games, where gold bullion is used for chips.

- The Ted Kennedy Chappaquiddick Open — The layout of the "Thousand Bridges" course is probably the toughest on the tour. Driving over the lakes is treacherous and many balls are never recovered. A popular feature, however, is the entrance requirement. Golfers may enter at the last moment.

- The Richard Nixon San Clemente Classic — Set on the plush grounds of the tricky "Watergate No. 2" course, the tournament is played under a veil of tight secrecy. The press is banned from the course until the final round is over and leaks about daily scores are discouraged. The last-place finisher is pardoned and invited back for another try.

These are but a few possibilities that come to mind. With the presidential election season approaching, I expect everyone to get into the act. How about a tournament for Ronnie Reagan? Make it slick and with sharp doglegs to the right. Howard Baker? The greens at his tournament are extremely hard to read.

And what of Jimmy Carter? The way things are going now, he may not make it to the tee.