



SPORT STROKES

ROYAL CORTISSOZ

Teeing with Matisse

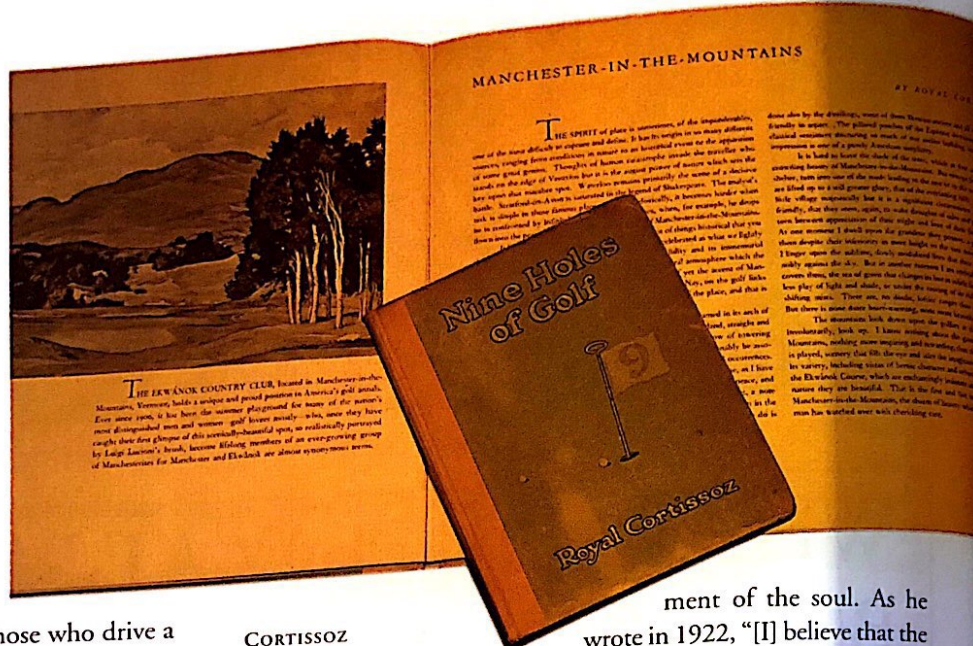
BY BILL NOBLE

“Art is long and time is fleeting,” wrote Henry Wadsworth Longfellow more than a century ago. Chances are he wasn’t speaking of golf nor those who play it, yet he could have been, if the art in question is seen through the eyes of an art lover.

In this time of professional hype, where skill on the golf course is measured in dollars and cents rather than nourishment for the soul, the game itself has taken on mechanical-technical allure, and its heroes and heroines are those who drive a ball further, endorse more products and rush from tournament to tournament. The notion that golf offers more than here-and-now materialism seems quaint and unrealistic, until we pause to gaze at the game without a modern filter.

Do words like “enchanted,” “serene,” “masterpiece,” or “faith” fit our concept of the game? As we stride the fairways or linger over a putt, are sentiments of “beauty” and “joy” filling us? The answers, of course, depend upon who we are and where we are. But seen or experienced by an artiste, the game of golf can certainly evoke such descriptions.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Royal Cortissoz, a journalist of Spanish descent, saw soulful possibilities in the modest game of golf. A chunky, lively man with iron gray mustache and goatee, Cortissoz worked as an art and literature critic from his mid-teens, and he saw the game transcending the idea of sport as an end in itself. To him, golf offered a means to harmony and joy—a fulfill-



CORTISSOZ
PENNING VOLUMES
ON ART, AND
TWO TREASURES
ON GOLF.
Bob Labbanee

ment of the soul. As he wrote in 1922, “[I] believe that the pursuit of beauty is as legitimate on the links as among works of painting and sculpture.”

For many years Cortissoz was a member of Ekwanok Country Club in Manchester, and in the words of Newsweek Magazine, golf was “his favorite pastime.” Born in 1869 in Brooklyn, New York, he dropped out of school in his mid-teens and went to work for the architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White in New York City. It was here that his first attitudes about art developed, as the McKim firm was renowned for its classic and traditional approaches to art and architecture. At the same time, Cortissoz, who always loved to write, began corresponding with a Kansas City newspaper on art subjects, and by his eighteenth birthday he had published his first article on art.

He caught the eye of Charles McKim, the founding partner of his firm, and not long after his twenty-first birthday Cortissoz accompanied

VERMONT GOLF

McKim to Italy on behalf of the upcoming Chicago World's Fair. Their mission was to study sculpture in the Vatican's gallery and choose those pieces that would be reproduced in plaster for the Fair. It was a heady experience for young Cortisoz, and by the time they returned to America, his attitudes about art had solidified, and he would not deviate from them through the remainder of his life.

Cortisoz's feelings for golf were similarly molded over time. Though no records exist to confirm it, his membership at Ekwanok and his residence in Manchester dated to the early part of this century. In his writings he speaks of playing at Ekwanok and other courses as soul-fulfilling. "Landscape is there," he wrote, "hills and streams and the enchantment of trees. The human body in action on the golf course is often full of beauty." As he walked and played, his sentiments soared. "And then there is the beauty of the game itself, a game dedicated to strength, skill, joy and honor."

Founded in 1899, Ekwanok is one of Vermont's oldest and most enduring golf courses, and from its earliest days the club had a solid place in Vermont golf history. It was a charter member of the Vermont Golf Association, and within a year of its founding had hosted a major invitational golf tournament that would continue for thirty-three years. Ekwanok's first president was Edward S. Isham, a native Vermonter who became a highly respected attorney in Chicago and long-time law partner of Robert Todd Lincoln. He returned to Vermont in semi-retirement, built a home near Manchester and was the obvious choice to lead Ekwanok from its founding. He set the tone for the club that Royal Cortisoz would find so appealing, and the enduring nature of Ekwanok can be seen in the unvaried layout of its

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holes. As club historian and long-time member Sydney Stokes observed, "The course has changed very little from its initial design ninety-eight years ago. Some greens and tees have been moved a bit, but that's about all."

As Ekwanok grew in stature during the first quarter of the twentieth century, so did Royal Cortissoz. He became art critic for The New York Tribune (which later became The New

York Herald Tribune), and there he remained for more than fifty years. In the early 1900s he also assumed the literary critics chair at the newspaper, occupying a key role in the New York cultural landscape.

His views, molded through the influence of McKim, retained their solid hold on traditionalism. Anything new and different, anything "modern" in the art sense brought out pungent

criticism. Picasso, whom he called "the great panjandrum of the cubist tabernacle," is living proof that "modernism [does not] get its practitioners anywhere." He called Matisse "the most stationary of [modern artists]" and as for Cezanne, why he "never quite learned his trade!"

THE GOLFER AS ARTIST; IS IT SO FAR-FETCHED?

Cortissoz found a pillar at Ekwanok. The natural landscape and unswerving traditions of golf captured his allegiance, and it was here that Royal Cortissoz sang his lovesong with the game. While the world of art filled his work day (and spurred him to write more than a dozen books on a wide array of art subjects), the world of golf took his attention at other times. He could write in *The Painter's Craft* in 1930, "... who shall say where the 'manual dexterity' leaves off and the mysterious alchemy of that intensely personal thing 'touch' begins?" While he seems to be discussing painting, it is not a major leap to conclude he's also thinking about golf. "Manual dexterity" relates to hitting a golf shot well. "Touch" is the feel and artistry of putting it close. The golfer as artist; is it so far-fetched?

In 1922 Royal Cortissoz gave in to his passion for golf and wrote *Nine Holes of Golf*, an exploration of the game's art and beauty. "All authoritative books about golf," he began, "are written by experts. This is not an authoritative book. It is addressed to the golfer who loves the game regardless of his score." The book contains his musings on a variety of subjects from golf partnering, to water hazards, to different types of golf courses and clubs, to holes-in-one.

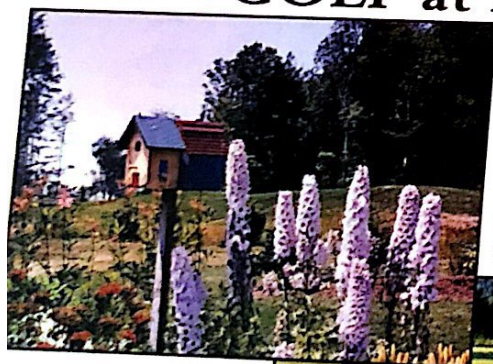


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to the value of the legendary "duffer" to the game. Yet the strain of art and beauty runs through the pages. "The only time I ever saw Bobby Jones on the links," he wrote, "he wore a glowing red beret. He played, of course, like a consummate artist."

Most of us look at hazards—water, sand, woods—with disdain or fear, vowing that our golf ball won't find a home there. Never do we see it in soulful terms. But Royal Cortissoz adapts his search for art even here. As he discusses courses he has played (The National Golf Links at Southampton, Long Island: "full of charm, a glorious course, riotous in color", Garden City Golf Club, Long Island: "Chimney, water towers, they don't uplift the game") he comes to his beloved Ekwanok, and here he speaks of a water hazard which he calls a "priceless example" of the "right" art. "It occurs on the third hole," he wrote, "where it protects the green. The approach from any distance at all is wickedly deceptive, for until you are very near you cannot see how the land slopes just enough to woo even a greatly rolling ball to disaster." Only a perfectly struck shot would make the green, he states, and while the water was just an inch deep, "the banks are very high... as to make the job like that of urging a ball straight up the side of a house."

He even finds artistic measure in the duffer, whom he calls, "the rock-ribbed foundation of golf." The duffer faces a round of golf in the same way a painter prepares to work on a new canvas—as an experiment. "And this artistic conception of the struggle involves a peculiarly exquisite satisfaction in victory, when the victory comes off."

In 1938, at age 69, Cortissoz enjoyed another victory. He helped to establish, and served as first president of the Vermont Seniors Golf Association. The organization was headquar-

tered at his beloved Ekwanok, and an annual tournament was conducted for the 31 members.

Call Royal Cortissoz an unquenchable optimist, and it wouldn't be far from the truth. Though much of his life was spent critiquing artists, his position on golf was without censorious judgement. Few can find beauty and joy in a game that humbles us over and over and brings thunder claps of frustration.

Yet, perhaps, when we strike a shot just right, when the ball arches against a crystalline blue sky and descends to a sparkling, velvety green, we feel a surge of satisfaction that has few rivals. Perhaps then, if only for an instant, we understand the purity and the clarity of the game. "The genius of golf lies in its pure idealism," Royal Cortissoz wrote, "its spur in the struggle after perfection."

♦♦♦

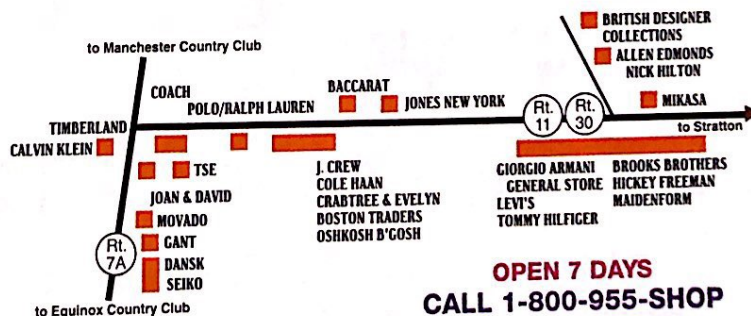
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