

For Obama, Golfing Is a Very Leisurely Pursuit

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OAK BLUFFS, Mass. — [Bill Clinton](#) was famous for the creative way he kept score. Both George Bushes would speed-golf through 18 holes as if they had to beat the clock, not the course.



Jason Reed/Reuters

President Obama spent two and a half hours on Tuesday at Mink Meadows Golf Club in Vineyard Haven, Mass.

And [President Obama](#)?

Long, slow rounds. A lot of time hunting for balls in the woods. All dished up with a dollop of trash-talking.

The First Golfer brought his duffer's game to Martha's Vineyard this week. By Thursday, Mr. Obama had logged three golf games in four days, appearing at one island course after another. He spent five hours on Monday afternoon playing 18 holes at the Farm Neck Golf Club here, two and a half hours on Tuesday playing nine holes at Mink Meadows Golf Club in Vineyard Haven, and several hours playing Thursday afternoon at the Vineyard Golf Club in Edgartown.

While Mr. Obama has indulged in other vacation activities — he took his family bike riding Thursday morning, went to the beach on Wednesday and took his wife to dinner Tuesday night — golf has been the only recurring one.

So, clearly, the president likes to hit the links. But is he any good at it, especially compared with his predecessors?

“His golf games are long because he’s not very good,” said Don Van Natta Jr., a reporter for The New York Times who wrote “First Off the Tee: Presidential Hackers, Duffers and Cheaters From Taft to Bush” (PublicAffairs, 2003).

Unlike Mr. Clinton, who had a reputation for shaving strokes off his score, Mr. Obama “doesn’t fudge his scores,” Mr. Van Natta said, adding: “If he shoots an 11 on a hole, he will write down 11.” (Mr. Obama shoots in the 90s on a good day, Mr. Van Natta said.)

White House officials, trying to protect their boss from guffaws, refuse to divulge Mr. Obama’s scores. The president himself envelops his golf game in a cloak of secrecy. Unlike the drill with many of his predecessors, who allowed reporters to watch them play the first hole, and then return to the 18th to watch the grand finish, the White House press pool covering Mr. Obama is kept far away from the action.

“The verdant entry to the entry road to the entrance of the Vineyard Golf Club is as close as we get to Potus right now, colleagues,” Elizabeth Williamson of The Wall Street Journal wrote Thursday in the report on the president’s activities that she shared with other White House reporters.

(Much to the disappointment of the press corps, reports that there might be a vacation game with [Tiger Woods](#) look to be false.)

The official word on Thursday from the White House deputy spokesman, Bill Burton, was that Mr. Obama has been enjoying his golf game.

But some White House aides — who, to be fair, were not on the golf course with the president on Thursday — said that those who were there mentioned a lot of trash-talking coming from the First Mouth,

despite his less-than-[Masters](#)-level play. Mr. Obama, whose first sports love is basketball, took up golf seriously in 1997, when he was in the Illinois State Senate. It has been a love affair ever since, and Mr. Obama is now the 15th of the last 18 presidents to play golf, Mr. Van Natta said. “The only nongolfers since Taft are Carter, Hoover and Truman,” he said.

Mr. Obama is notorious for dragging his staff members onto the golf course with him, including the White House trip director, Marvin Nicholson; the White House spokesman, [Robert Gibbs](#); and Ben Finkenbinder, the baby-faced press aide who also happened to play golf at Macalester College in St. Paul, when he was studying there a mere two years ago. On Martha’s Vineyard this week, Mr. Obama was playing with Mssrs. Nicholson and Finkenbinder, along with the chief executive of UBS, Robert Wolf; and Eric Whitaker, a Chicago pal.

This is the first summer vacation that the Obama family has taken with the White House press pool on hand to chronicle Mr. Obama’s every move, and therefore, the first vacation providing an opportunity to get a handle on Mr. Obama’s golf scores. Alas, White House officials continued their veil of secrecy, and would not say. Which means he is probably still in the 90s, respectable for a weekend golfer.

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