

Want to score? Be a good sport

WALLACE IMMEN — GLOBE & MAIL

June 27, 2007



Whether golf or tennis, hockey or curling, playing the game can bring career gains, Wallace Immen writes

Michelle McIntosh was no golfer. One of the few times she ever hit the course, her brother took away her clubs.

"He said watching me play was too painful," she recalls.

So, Ms. McIntosh was more than a little stunned when she was interviewed in May for a job that would be a big step up in her career - and was told that playing golf would be a make-or-break factor in getting hired.

Ms. McIntosh had to fess up to being a duffer - but she swore she was willing to take lessons and learn to play a good game.

Such enthusiasm was what the bosses wanted to hear. Just three hours after the interview, she was called with an offer to become a business development representative in the Mississauga office of Calgary-based environmental analysis company Agat Laboratories Ltd.

True to her word, she's just completed a five-week golf-for-business program organized by the Sheridan Institute of Technology in conjunction with golf course operator Kaneff Golf, where she learned strategy, rules and etiquette, and play.

Now, she's about to face her first big test - networking with clients on the golf course.

"Let's just say I'm a little nervous," Ms. McIntosh confesses.

But she knows her bosses were right when they told her that networking with clients on the course would be crucial to her job - and she realizes that having shied away from invitations to play golf with clients, co-workers and bosses in the past, she'd missed golden opportunities to develop relationships that could help advance her career.

"I'd always thought it was something I wanted in my career arsenal because golf is a major part of business."

The opportunities don't end with that sport. Getting into the game, whether golf or tennis, baseball or curling, hockey or even beach volleyball, can provide great opportunities to score in your career, pros say.

"Look at it this way. If you want to bond with the boss, play the boss's game," advises leadership coach Cassandra Gierden, president of Prophet Coaching in Vancouver.

And if you want to catch clients and co-workers when they're in a mood to be receptive to your ideas, be there when they're out of the office and on the course, rink or court, she adds.

Playing sports can be the great equalizer, says Vince Gowman, founder of Remembering to Play, a Vancouver-based consultancy.

"Playing sport is a great way to loosen up our rigidity about our roles. When we release, we actually begin to engage with others more creatively," Mr. Gowman says, adding that sports participation also boosts co-operation, teamwork and trust.

But as fun and easy as athletic endeavours might sound, a surprising number of people hang back, whether it is playing on an office baseball team, joining the boss for a one-on-one on the tennis court, or participating in one of the many corporate sports events that fill the calendar especially in the summer months.

In fact, the prospect of participating in sports fills many people with dread, Ms. Gierden says.

"In most cases, it is because they are afraid of making a faux pas or looking like an amateur."

Indeed, 40 per cent of the 6,154 people who responded to a globeandmail.com poll last week said they believe sports and work are two separate pursuits, and another 30 per cent said they don't participate in any sport at all.

Another 8 per cent said they don't play sports to career advantage because they worry that their level of skill will make them look incompetent, and another 2 per cent fear their competitive drive might offend those they play with.

However, 12 per cent of respondents have made the connection between sports and their career, saying playing has helped them expand their networks outside the office.

And another 8 per cent said they have seen payoffs in getting closer to managers and colleagues.

The number who don't play sports for career gain surprises Lou Clements, a partner in executive transition consultancy Miller Dallas Inc. in Toronto, whose business revolves around meeting executives and finding out when they are ready for a career change.

"There's a familiarity that comes from playing together in a game, and that can be any game," Mr. Clements says.

He says he developed referrals for many of his best clients through contacts made while playing golf or hockey and on the bench or over beers after the game.

"Hockey is particularly good at bringing out the character of people," he says.

"Even when playing recreationally, you can tell a lot about their determination, their competitiveness and their ability to co-operate in a team by watching them in a game."

It was a big blow last year when he had to hang up his skates due to a back injury. Ditto his golf bag when a torn rotator cuff couldn't be fixed.

Now, he says, he's extremely frustrated.

"I've had to turn down five golfing invitations in the past four weeks that would have been great networking opportunities," Mr. Clements frets.

If more traditional sports, such as golf, tennis and hockey, don't grab your fancy, there are plenty of other options these days.

Holly Rhodes credits her involvement with a dragon boat racing team for helping her rise to branch manager for AJ Insurance Services Ltd. in Victoria.

Ms. Rhodes, who started as one of 20 paddlers on a competitive office crew, now runs her own team.

"Participating really gives you a good strong base. I found confidence to lead a team and a lot of the people I have met paddling have become clients," she says.

"There are paddling parties, barbecues and dances. It gives you a chance to know everybody," she adds. "The camaraderie is incredible and you don't have to be an incredible athlete to do it."

For James Chan, beach volleyball has helped get the ear of a managing partner and boosted his visibility at employer Ernst & Young LLP in Toronto.

Mr. Chan started playing the game informally two years ago with some workmates. Soon, dozens of other E&Y employees wanted in. Mr. Chan approached his boss about setting up and sponsoring a team. This summer, it has grown to several teams sporting E&Y logos that play in corporate leagues at varying levels of ability.

Mr. Chan says his involvement has not only improved his spike but also his career.

"Helping organize the teams has given me more visibility with management and demonstrated my leadership potential," he says, which he credits with helping to speed his promotion from entry level to senior staff accountant at E&Y.

Even with the array of sports growing, golf still remains the key game to be in, experts say.

"I find golf is a major part of the corporate world, more so than other sports," says Lori Weir, senior vice-president of human resources for risk services firm Marsh Canada Ltd.

As a non-contact sport, she points out it is easy for men and women of all ages to play. And you can be comfortable as a beginner playing in a group that is more experienced.

As a bonus, because so many executives pursue golf, it can be a way to network with management. "Where else can you be side by side enjoying a nice day with your boss for four hours? There's lots of time between holes that are conducive to making connections and building relationships."

Ms. Weir finds golf has opened many doors in her business, which is still male-dominated.

"Because I know how to play golf, I get many invitations to play with clients and charity tournaments, and that has helped me network and build ongoing professional relationships that would have been difficult to develop any other way," she says.

Even if you decide you don't actually want to play golf or any other sport, you should still find a way to participate, Ms. Gierden advises.

"Get out there and cheer your colleagues on and get involved in team gatherings and celebrations. It will make you part of the action."

If you're worried about looking foolish, taking lessons can also make a difference, pros suggest.

Ms. McIntosh's brother won't be taking away her clubs any more.

"I went and did a round with my family the other night. They were impressed."

She's hoping her clients will feel the same.

"I'm going to have quite a few opportunities to play in company and client events this summer," she says.

"I'm realizing what an icebreaker it can be in business. Playing golf breaks down that barrier of formality and gives people a chance to become friends. It's fun to play the game as well."

Rules of the game

It's not whether you win or lose, it's just about playing the game. If you want to make the most of participating in sports for your career, here are some tips from experts:

Employees

Be a team player. A good show of sportsmanship goes a long way.

Don't be overly competitive. It's nice to win but it is, after all, a game - and you won't score points if all that shines through is your desire to win.

Think about timing. If you're going to talk business, don't be overly aggressive. Wait until you see people enjoying themselves.

Know the etiquette. Each sport has rules and codes of conduct - avoid annoying fellow players.

Take lessons. A teacher can help make you more competent, confident and more fun to play with. And it shows you are determined to be as good as you can.

Reduce distractions. Turn off cellphones and BlackBerrys while playing to keep your concentration and avoid distracting others.

Commit to the time. Corporate or charity tournaments are usually full-day events with a social component afterward, which is the best time for building camaraderie with clients and fellow employees.

Plan a follow-up. Use the opportunity to plan another encounter.

Employers

Create a community. If employees are involved in a regular sport activity, think of having team uniforms and cheers.

Keep it voluntary. No one should be pressured to participate.

Encourage spectators. Not everyone wants to play, but co-workers can enjoy being in the stands to cheer.

Keep it social. Plan practices and a gathering for drinks or snacks afterward to encourage chat and networking.

Build in rewards. Along with medals for the winners, give personal thanks to those who participate.

Wallace Immen