

A FATHER, A SON,  
AND THE HEALING POWER  
OF GOLF

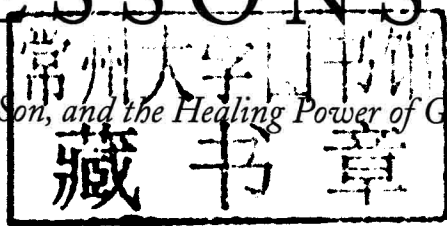
DRIVING  
LESSONS



STEVE FRIEDMAN

# DRIVING LESSONS

*A Father, a Son, and the Healing Power of Golf*



STEVE FRIEDMAN

INTRODUCTION BY JAMES DODSON,  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
OF *Final Rounds*

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PRAISE FOR *Driving Lessons*

"A story as elegant and unforgettable as the arc of a perfectly hit golf ball on a summer afternoon."

—BILL STRICKLAND, AUTHOR OF *Ten Points* AND  
EDITOR-AT-LARGE, *Bicycling* MAGAZINE

"Steve Friedman may not be much of a golfer, but he's one heck of a writer. Rarely have the joys and sorrows of the father-son-putter dynamic been so keenly observed."

—MARK ADAMS, AUTHOR OF *Mr. America*

"Steve Friedman is one of the best American chroniclers of the intersections between 'shallow' sport and deep feeling, and in *Driving Lessons* he's at the top of his game. Here it's golf—a sport beloved by the author's father and despised and resisted by the son for nearly a half-century—that brings these two very different men, despite tangled ambivalence and resentment on both sides, to appreciate each other. A frank, poignant, blessedly unsentimental little book about the way sport can serve, for a father and son divided by a common history, as a shared language."

—MICHAEL GRIFFITH, AUTHOR OF *Spikes*

"Aren't we all, in some respects, trying to play the games of our parents? In *Driving Lessons*, Steve Friedman offers an unusually frank, often hilarious, and ultimately inspiring account of one son's attempt to unlock the mysteries of his family and of his own heart. Told with wit, intelligence, and honesty, this story explores the sweet, awkward space that exists between parents and their grown-up children."

—SARA CORBETT, AUTHOR OF *Venus to the Hoop*

**FOR MY FATHER**

# DRIVING LESSONS

# Introduction

*By James Dodson*

LET me try to explain why Steve Friedman's lovely memoir *Driving Lessons* resonates so powerfully for me.

Back in the mid-'70s, during my senior year in college, I went home on several weekends to play a series of "friendly" father-son golf matches against my dad's friend Robert and Robert's grown son Rick.

On paper it seemed like a pretty appealing idea. After all, the two dads were good friends who had been playing together for more than a decade, and both sons

were single-digit handicappers, though at that time I was hitting far more books than fairways.

"There's just one thing," my father pointed out before the first match. "Rick can be pretty intense, and his daddy never stops coaching him. I think Robert hoped Rick might be good enough to turn pro someday, but it never worked out." He added that Rick was good enough to play for a top Southern college but now worked for his old man, which sometimes explained the palpable tension between the two.

"Junior's a scratch player but he has a tendency to lose his cool. You just stay loose and we'll just be ourselves and find a way to handle them. It'll be fun. I'll buy the beer afterwards."

Truth be told, I came to dread these father-son team encounters. For one thing, the matches turned out to be short on fraternal bonhomie and long on repressed male anger and frustration, a walking seminar on youthful angst and paternal disappointment.

As I'd been warned, Robert never stopped giving Rick sharply worded advice on his swing path or his weight shift or his flying elbow or whatever, while the



## *Driving Lessons*

son brooded and lashed even harder at the ball, pounding it 300 yards down the seam, other times sending it to oblivion across adjoining fairways. More than once, at a key moment where he needed to pull off a good shot, Rick failed to do so and actually threw his club down in disgust.

In a perverse sort of way, this made the matches more satisfying for me than they might have been, for Robert and Rick's psychological dynamic was exactly the opposite of what existed between me and my old man. As usual, my dad and I walked along talking about everything from Nixon's foreign policy initiatives to the accursed growth of Day-Glo orange golf balls. (In these instances, my dad was enthusiastically pro, while I was stridently con.) As usual, we had a grand old time needling each other about these subjects and a million other things that made our golf sorties such a blast.

Somehow through it all, though I was something of a reformed club-thrower and competitive hothead myself, we almost always managed to find a way to beat Rick and his father by the slimmest of margins, which of course doubled their misery.

"You know," Rick said to me after losing the third and final match to us, "you wouldn't be a half bad player if you took this game seriously and learned to concentrate on it."

"You might be right," I was forced to agree, "but it wouldn't be half as much fun."

\*

The simple truth is, I took up playing golf principally because I loved being around my funny, philosophical father, an upbeat character I took to calling (not entirely kindly) "Opti the Mystic" during my know-it-all teenage years, owing to his tendency to quote some ancient sage on faith or impermanence when you least expected it, and to find the silver lining in almost any situation. If it's true, as Carl Jung insists, that sons dream their father's dream, perhaps it was simply inevitable that I would fall for my old man's favorite game, which he fell in love with while stationed in Scotland near Lytham St. Annes during the Second World War.

Whatever else is true, golf is the most social game on earth, typically involving hours of walking and talking with playing companions and roughly only three minutes, give or take, of actual ball-striking concentration. In fact, that may help explain why a high percentage of people who take up the game and come to love it do so under the initial influence and guidance of a thoughtful parent, a golf-loving mom or dad who passes along something far more valuable than a few good swing tips.

Given the game's storied traditions of fair play and honest self-conduct, it's scarce wonder the auld game has descended from its woolly Scottish antecedents as a great teaching tool for life—and a splendid means for keeping the communication lines between generations open and active.

A decade or so ago, not long after I published an account of my early golf life with my dad in a memoir called *Final Rounds*, framing the tale in what turned out to be our first and last golf pilgrimage to England and Scotland, I began receiving amazing letters from readers eager to tell me about their own relationships with either their fathers or sons through the game of golf.

Not all mirrored my experience of having a father who felt it was both sufficient and wise to simply introduce his son to the assorted pleasures and Darwinist charms of life's most difficult game and leave it at that—artfully igniting my passion, if you will, by simply revealing the joy and friendships the game provided. My dad's reluctance to ever show me anything more than a basic correct setup and swing—calmly pointing out that if I really wanted to improve my game I should either watch fine players or take lessons from our profane and crusty old pro—would have nicely done a Zen master proud. By offering me only a tantalizing glimpse of paradise, in effect, he guaranteed I would be a disciple of the game forever.

In fact, many of the moving and surprisingly detailed letters I received were from sons (and even a few daughters) who'd either not had the benefit of a golf-loving parent or perhaps had grown up without a father entirely—and were, as a result, extramotivated to be a terrific, supportive dad to their own children.

Others wrote simply to tell me about their experiences with an “Opti the Mystic” of their own and how

he—or sometimes she—had shaped their game and life in a positive and lasting way.

Finally, there were those who claimed reading *Final Rounds* actually prompted them to pick up the telephone and call an aging parent and propose a golf sojourn of their own before time ran out. In a few of these cases, the estrangement had been significant, sometimes years in length.

I'll never forget the Baltimore man who wrote me that he finished the book one day and drove to see his ninety-one-year-old father in New Jersey the next. Owing to some "silly private family matter that really didn't mean anything," the two had not spoken in almost five years. Six weeks after their reunion, the pair set off for a week together in Ireland, sticks in tow. A few weeks after they returned, the father suddenly passed away. "I have tears in my eyes as I write this to you," the aging son concluded. "But that trip to Ireland was the most meaningful time we ever had together. So thanks."

Not surprisingly, I had tears in my eyes as I read the letter—and tried to think what I could possibly write back to him.

I settled for a simple thank-you of my own.

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Which brings me to Steve Friedman's story.

*Driving Lessons* is the moving tale of a gifted middle-aged writer who decides, on the shoals of fifty, to go home to St. Louis to try and reconnect with an aging papa who simply adores the game of golf and wishes his son shared his passion. Like my own father, Steve's dad is an upbeat and cheerful salesman for the virtues of a game Steve never had much desire to play—until now.

Driven by the internal clock that governs all our waking days and sleepless nights, Steve Friedman goes in quest of forging something new from the ancient game of golf: a deeper and perhaps truer understanding of his father.

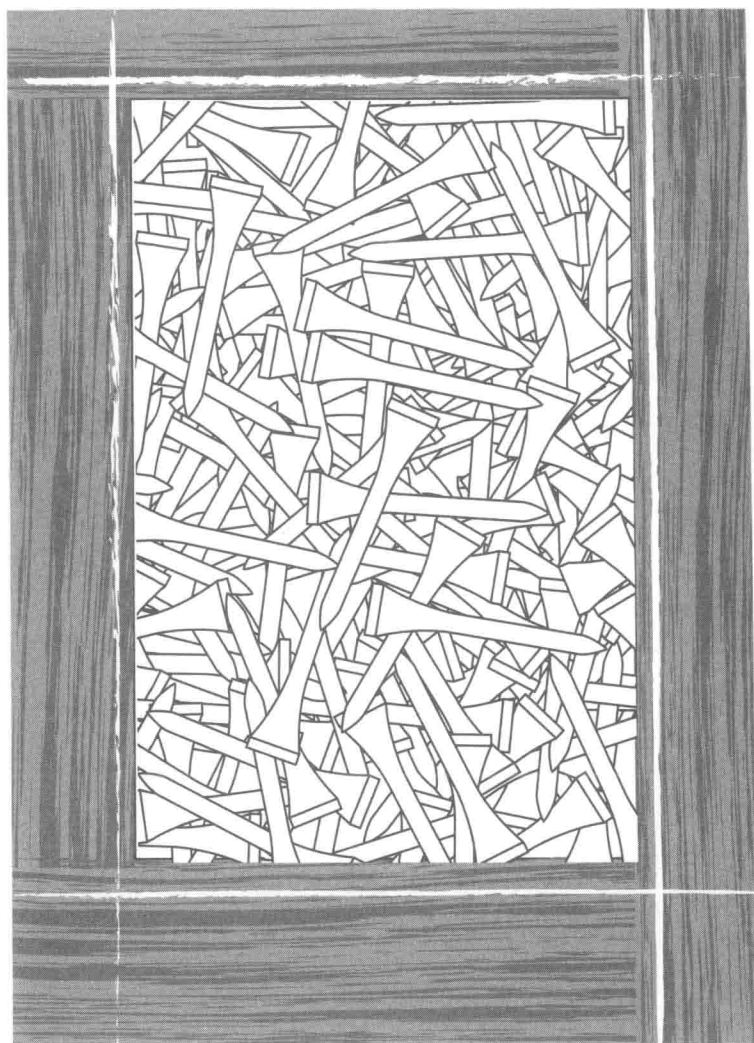
Among golf teachers it's a fairly common belief that learning to drive a golf ball straight and true is a difficult enterprise for a kid to master—but nigh impossible for someone attempting to learn the game in middle age. At the risk of sounding like my father's son, what Steve

accomplishes and learns as he struggles to master his own demons and come to grips with the impossible physics of a game he never learned to love will both touch your heart and perhaps prompt you to consider your own spiritual loose ends and vanishing mortality.

“Enjoy the game—it ends far too soon,” Opti the Mystic used to regularly tell me, back when I rarely gave two seconds of thought to his goofy, upbeat pronouncements.

Oh, that I had a chance to go back and play just one more round with my old man. Even a match against Rick and Robert would be great.

Hell, I'd even buy the beer.





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