

"To play well, you need to let your expectations go," says Lama Kunga.

Good Karma Bad Golf

BY JOSH SENS

Teeing it up with a true guru,
the Tibetan lama who is known
to his chums as George

WHEN HE WAS 7 YEARS old, living in a remote mountain village in Tibet, Losang Kunga Gyurme was identified by religious visionaries as the reincarnation of an 11th-century lama. So he's got that going for him.

What he doesn't have going is his iron game. He's chewing up the fairway of a short par 4 at Stone Tree Golf Club in Novato, Calif.—a wire-framed, wildly flailing figure in a saffron robe.

"That last shot had too much ego," he says. "This time, I need to clear my mind."

He clears his mind, but his 7-iron shot doesn't clear the water. Triple bogey for the man known today as Lama Kunga Rinpoche, esteemed Buddhist teacher and also a devoted student of the links.

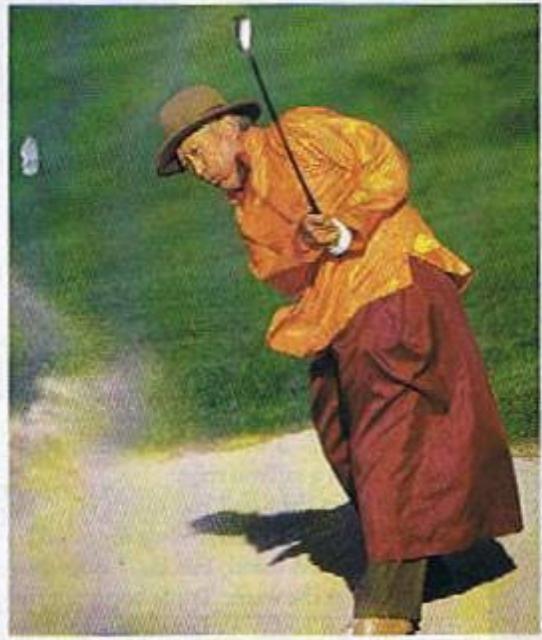
In a game overrun with self-proclaimed gurus, Lama Kunga is the real McCoy, a spiritual guide dispatched to this country by the Dalai Lama to lead disciples toward enlightenment. That's one of his missions. His other: seeking out fairways and greens.

"Golf is a nice game, the best game," Lama Kunga says. "To play well, you need to let your expectations go."

The lama had agreed to an afternoon round at the swank course despite its strict dress code: no jeans, no tank tops. They don't have a policy on yellow robes.

I'd picked him up at his place, a large house that doubles as a meditation center, with views of the Golden Gate Bridge. He's a monkish 65-year-old with buzzed gray hair and a Larry Mize build. There were piles of plush pillows, a colorful shrine and an oversize snapshot of Lama Kunga's close friend, the Dalai Lama.

"No, the Dalai Lama does not play golf," says Lama Kunga. He looks disappointed. Last year, when the Dalai Lama was visiting the Bay Area, Lama Kunga considered dragging him to the driving range. Then he thought better of it. "One day I will say, 'Your Holiness, I would like to tell you about golf,'" Lama Kunga says. "He will be happy to know I play. He is very busy making the world a better place, but I think he could use the exercise."



Lama Kunga sees nothing wrong with occasionally improving his lie in a bunker. "Why not?" he asks.

SUFFERING COMES FROM 'ANGER, FRUSTRATION, SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS. IF YOU PLAY GOLF, YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.'

On the way to the course, the lama expounds on the link between golf and Buddhism. In both religions, one comes face to face with the Four Noble Truths. The first truth holds that suffering is unavoidable.

"The second," the lama says, "is that the origins of suffering come from anger, frustration, self-consciousness. If you play golf, you know what I mean." (The third and fourth truths may not fix

your slice, but they do explain how to get rid of all this pesky suffering.)

Just then, the transmission in my Geo begins to suffer. We hit a congested merge, but the stick is stuck. A big rig roars behind us, blaring its horn. But the lama stays serene, gazing peacefully over the dashboard.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'd hate to be responsible for the death of a high lama."

"That would be bad karma," he replies. I can't tell if he's making a pun.

We sputter the rest of the way in the breakdown lane. Outside the course entrance, the car gasps and dies. I get out and push. The lama steers. When we park, I kick the tires and curse.

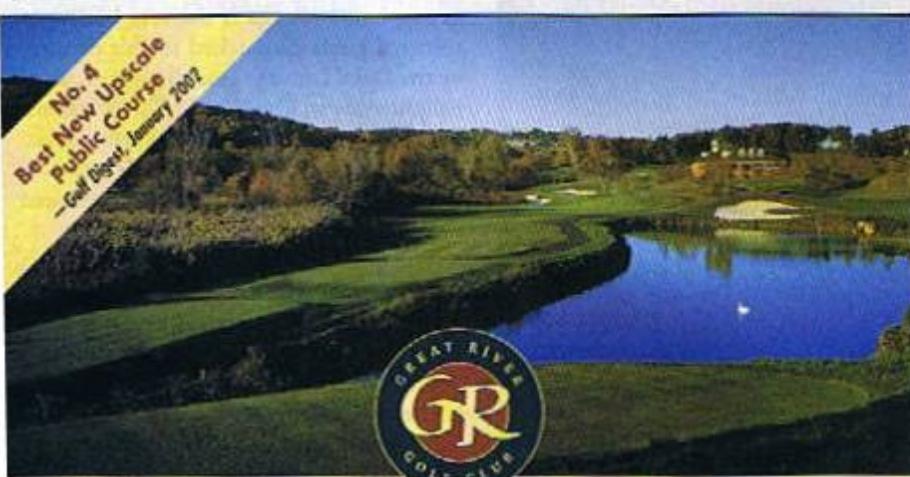
"If it can be fixed, it is not a problem," says the lama. "If it cannot be fixed, it is not a problem." He is sounding a lot like my mechanic. Still, he's right. The sun is shining. We're playing golf.

We're joined by Brian (Big Dog) Soczka, a local pro known for his prodigious length, who begins the proceedings with a Himalayan drive 300 yards down the fairway. The lama pull-hooks his ball into the weeds—the golf equivalent of yin and yang.

What is the sound of one man hacking? You learn the answer quickly when you play with Lama Kunga. He first picked up a club at age 57 while visiting Sweden on a spiritual mission. One pure shot was enough to hook him. He took a lesson, learned a few fundamentals. Someone told him to visualize his shots, a simple hint that didn't help at all.

"To me, golf is 90 percent physical," says the lama. "Mentally I am very strong. How do you explain that my best score is 97?"

If only he had started younger. But there was no golf in tiny Black Horse village, where Lama Kunga was raised. When he was still knee-high to Willie Wood, members of a spiritual search-party showed up at his door. The child, they said, was the reincarnation of Sevanrepa, a disciple of Milarepa, the revered poet and lama who had lived 900 years before. He was whisked off to a monastery, ordained, and was serving as an abbot in 1959 when the Chinese invaded Tibet. Three years later, on orders from the Dalai Lama, he fled to the United



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States. He settled in New Jersey ("Very cold," he says), then moved to California, where he now tees it up several times a week. He never bets and rarely keeps score. Most days, he shows up as a single at a public track and introduces himself as George.

Although Buddha recommended the

Middle Path, on the course Lama Kunga rarely takes it. Now and then, he admits, he feels the seeds of golf frustration growing inside him, but he chuckles at barbarians who fling their putters and snap their sand wedges. "They have not achieved consciousness yet," he says.

Soczka, meanwhile, is flat-out unconscious, blistering his drives and stiffing his irons. On the 13th green, he turns to the lama: "If you hit a good shot, does that mean you have good karma?"

Lama Kunga embarks on an elaborate description of the 13 stages of enlightenment. A good shot, he says, doesn't necessarily imply good karma, but it can represent a small "rebirth."

On the 14th hole, the lama skids his drive into the trees, then drops another in the fairway without adding a stroke. His next shot plops in the bunker. A fried-egg lie. But the lama improves it.

"Would the Buddha say it's OK to move your ball?" I ask.

"Sure," the lama grins. "Why not?"

On the 15th tee, Soczka strolls over to the lama. "Try releasing your hands," he says. "Fire through at impact. Finish high."

The lama uncorks a beauty. He pumps his fist. There they stand, the golf pro and the guru, exchanging high-fives. It's a giddy moment, and Soczka can't resist the Caddyshack comment.

"Hey, lama," he says, in his best Bill Murray. "How about a little something, you know, for the effort?"

But the lama is unacquainted with the movie. So Soczka fills him in on the famous routine: how the Dalai Lama, instead of paying his caddie, promises him total consciousness.

"Yes, yes, very funny," says the lama. "I will have to rent that movie. And if you'd like total consciousness, you can have it. Why not?"

The round winds down. Soczka closes birdie-par-birdie. No one's keeping track of the lama's score, least of all the lama. If he makes bogey, it is not a problem. If he makes double bogey, it is not a problem.

I call for a tow truck. The lama lays a hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry about your car," he says. "Let go of your expectations. That is very important."

"Maybe one day my car will be reborn with a new transmission," I suggest.

The lama looks doubtful.

"I don't know about that," he says. "But I would like to be reincarnated as a better golfer some day." ♦

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