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Once Removed: Productive Life, Productive Day: Lessons from the Golf Course, Part 2

Episode 41 Summary

As discussed in the last episode, a common feature of daily life seems to be that everyone in the family is busy, and everyone struggles with being productive. Part 2 of this series explores more lessons from sports — particularly golf — for identifying the most important things to work on and staying productive throughout the day.

Transcript:

(0:00):

Hello and welcome back. I'm Steve Murphy, a trust and estates attorney with McGuireWoods, LLP. And this is Legacy Planning, Once Removed – my podcast on legacy, trusts, family, and everything else on my mind.

For those of you who are returning, again, welcome back. And for those of you who are new to the podcast, again, welcome.

This podcast is about more than just legacy planning. This is about the legacy mindset of how you affect others and how they affect you.

And we have a tagline here. We like to say: Walk like you leave footprints.

This is another episode on productivity, something on everyone's minds.

And this is part two.

In part one, we talked about activities and sports more specifically, and golf even more specifically as a metaphor for how we can approach our day to make it more productive.

In episode one, we covered this problem of being busy and being productive, and how golf can provide a metaphor to help us be productive in our day.

In step one, we asked ourselves in the working world a question that golfers ask themselves, which is: "What am I working with today?"

And then in step two, we asked: "What does a good shot or day look like here for me?"

And in step three, I encouraged you to start your day by walking to the forward tees.

All those are discussed in more detail in part one.

So now let's continue with our golf metaphor. Let's continue with our metaphorical golf round.

(01:43):

Step four.

Okay, now you get to swing a club—and the lesson of step four is this:

Hit driver.

The driver is the club in the bag that can hit the ball the farthest.

But because of that, lots of players are anxious about hitting it.

They might find that it's too risky hitting the ball out of bounds or into the water.

They might be focused on being conservative and just trying to hit the fairway at all costs.

But the statistics show that hitting that driver is actually the best shot. That is if you calculate based on a statistic called strokes gained, for every 20 more yards you hit your shot, you improve more than one stroke per round.

So, you actually do better by hitting the ball farther, even if it's not exactly in the fairway or as accurate as you would like.

So, what does that mean for your day?

Well, look at that to-do list once you finish walking to the forward tees (that's step three).

Look at that big project that will allow you to focus for a long period of time.

Maybe it's a long office meeting or maybe it's reviewing that stack of documents. Those don't sound fun. You might want to put them off.

But if you look back to what your best day looks like, step two, you might realize that those tasks help you get the farthest towards your goal.

Other productivity experts have other ways to approach what you do first.

And Mark Twain had a famous quote that many use on this topic. Mark Twain said this, "If it's your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one first."

(03:35):

I mean, that's clever. It's a classic line by Mark Twain.

The idea is to do the thing that's the most unpleasant first.

That could be a way to approach your day.

And some others use more of an intuitive approach.

They say, just scan your to-do list and find the thing that gives you the most stress and focus on that as the first thing.

The problem that I find though, is that sometimes everything on the to-do list feels that way. Like every project is tied for number one on that list.

And some like to use what's called an Eisenhower matrix, organizing things that are urgent and things that are important.

There are lots of these approaches, but my problem is that sometimes those tasks are just hard to identify, or they don't get us the furthest on our way to that productive day.

But I think golf might have a lesson here in the context of "hit driver". We're looking for a task that's something a little bit different.

It's that project that will get you the furthest to that goal of that productive day.

The driver might cover more than half the distance to the hole.

So, if you have an eight-hour day, how about look for a three-hour project?

Now, there is some risk here.

But what do I mean by that?

Well, just like hitting the driver might put the ball out of bounds, working on that big project might be a little erratic, but that's the thing.

The stage of this project or the stage of this day isn't really about precision.

That's for a later stage. That's for step seven and step eight, spoiler alert. But this stage is about getting as much done as far as you can.

Now to hit driver, you have to learn how to focus mentally.

Many studies show that the average attention span for an adult is 50 minutes, and we're leaving aside studies of younger people who have been influenced by technology and have maybe an even shorter attention span.

(05:34):

So, if you sit down to work for three hours, you might not be able to sustain focus for that long.

So, you'll have to come up with some tricks for taking breaks and learning how to focus for longer periods.

That is back to the golfer.

What if the golfer can't hit their driver yet?

What if they're anxious about that shot?

Well, maybe the answer is:

Get better at it. Work on it.

At the range and over time—because we all know that, ideally that's the club you hit, and ideally that's the project you work on.

Okay, so now you step up and hit that driver. So, what next?

Well, now we're on to step five.

Step five isn't something fun to talk about.

Step five is envisioning that scenario where something goes wrong.

You hit a not great shot.

Maybe the drive goes into that clump of trees.

Maybe it goes into rough where there isn't a great way to get contact on the ball.

What then?

Well, the statistics still say that if you're in that position, if your goal is to be productive and efficient, the best thing to do is to get back on track.

Don't try for the hero shot where you hit some miraculous shot through the trees and onto the green.

There's too much risk there. The ball might deflect off a tree. It might be in an even worse spot. So, this kind of shot is called a recovery shot.

The idea is to put yourself back on the fairway, put yourself back in a good position, get back on track.

Some people think of this recovery shot as too conservative, but again, let's look at golf statistics.

The key difference between every level of golfer seems to be, not the number of birdies, but the number of double bogies—the number of holes that really went off track.

For scratch golfers, the average double bogies per round is about 0.25. That's less than one per round.

For single digit handicappers, it's about 1.5 per round. Again, not many.

For people with a 10 handicap, the average is about three double bogies per round.

And for 25 handicappers, someone who shoots about a hundred, they might shoot nine double bogies per round.

(04:48):

So, think about it, in golf getting better, getting to that next level doesn't seem to be about hitting those miracle shots; it's about minimizing those big blow-up holes.

In the working world, we think of this as a day that just went sideways, or maybe it's a project that went sideways.

Look down at your to-do list.

Maybe something has been sitting there for a long time and you want to hit that hero shot and get a perfect draft to your boss or your client.

But we all know the risk.

If you try to make it perfect, it might take even longer.

Or you might need so much mental energy to get it perfect that you never sit down to work on it to begin with and things just get worse.

So, what do you do instead?

Well take the lesson from golf:

Get back on track.

For that big task, maybe just reach out to the boss or client with a few questions in a status report.

Maybe it's an explanation of where you are and why it's taking so long.

That's a recovery shot in the working world, and I find that is one thing that separates really great productive people.

Okay, so now we've hit our driver off the tee, and we're back on the fairway.

Now, step six, this is when golfers can also get aggressive.

They see that pin, that flag, and they want to hit a perfect shot right to it.

But hold on, let's look back at golf statistics.

For a single digit handicapper who's about 117 yards away, or a nineties shooter who's about 78 yards away, they might start being able to hit with more precision.

But look at the stats.

Even with those shots, their average shot dispersion is still 30 yards total left to right.

That's a 90-foot range of where they could hit the ball.

You know, if someone told me that I can hit a shot into a 30-yard trampoline, into a 90-foot trampoline, I would not think of this as a precision shot.

So, if you're on the fairway, what should you be aiming for?

The answer is simple: the green.

The goal for this next shot, get the ball on the green.

And the best way to do that is typically to just aim at the middle of the green.

Ignore that pin, ignore that end result.

In fact, lots of teaching professionals will say that one fun game to play is to take the flag out of the hole and pretend like you don't know where the hole is, so that way you have no choice but to hit to the middle of the green.

And they say that in that case, almost everyone shoots better scores because hitting to the middle of the green also avoids other risks of missing the green.

If you miss the green, you might be in a sand trap or the rough, or you might have to just have a long chip back onto the green.

(10:35):

So, the goal is to get the ball on the green.

The goal is to start the next phase where precision can really begin.

And that next phase is putting.

So in the working world, yeah, after you hit your driver, when you're on the fairway, this next set of tasks in your day are medium-sized tasks, but they're not to that level of precision tasks.

Not yet. That has to wait until we're actually on the green.

And to be on the green, we'll have to wait until the next episode.

Okay, so in this episode, we've covered step four, hit driver, step five, what does a recovery shot look like in your day?

And step six, get on the green. Aim for the middle.

So, as we close for our thought exercise, maybe the best thing to do is to focus on that idea of hitting driver.

Look down at your to-do list. What is that daily task that while frustrating or maybe not making you feel like you're being productive, actually might get you the furthest to your daily goal?

Maybe that could be a good way to map out that first major task of your day.

I'm Steve Murphy and this has been Legacy Planning, Once Removed my podcast on, well, life in general.

I'll see you next time. And in the meantime: Walk like you leave footprints.