GEORGE STEFFES TRANSCRIPT
"Golf and Life"

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Edited for clarity and continuity

Lou Cannon: Stepping away from politics a little bit, you're a passionate golfer, and I know you think golf is important, and I want to ask you: First of all, did you ever golf with Ronald Reagan? Play golf with him?

George Steffes: I've walked with him, but I can't honestly remember if I actually played with him on the course.

Lou Cannon: What kind of a golfer was he?

George Steffes: He was a good golfer. He had been a good golfer.

Lou Cannon: That's what he said to me. When he was playing all the time, he was an OK golfer, but you think golf is important, and I'm not a golfer. I golfed a little, but tell us why it's important.

George Steffes: Because perhaps more than anything else, it can tell you about yourself. If you're willing to watch and listen, you can learn about who you are and how you handle life. Actually, most of what I do now in teaching golf is teaching the mental side of golf, teaching you how to be conscious, be aware of how you're approaching things. Let me see if I can think of an example.

Lou Cannon: Rich Ehisen said to me that you're helping him learn to golf and that you concentrated on not so much in the swing but what he was thinking about.

George Steffes: Let me try and do it this way: you find if you're thinking about things you can do, that there are three kinds of things you can do. I'm not talking about golf now. I'm talking about life, as well as golf. There are things you can do right at this moment, there are things that are in the past, you can do nothing about and things in the present you can do nothing about, and there are things you can do something about but only later on.

What you learn very quickly, when you hit a bad shot in golf, the typical way we respond as human beings is, "Oh, gosh! What did I do wrong?" There's nothing you can do about what you did wrong in the past shot. If I've got problems with family, if I've got health problems, there's nothing I can do about them now. I can do something about them later on. Then there are things I can do nothing about. If it's raining or windy, I can't do anything about that. To be worrying about it is just taking energy from me that I should be using for the things that I'm doing now.

What we teach in the mental course is how to look at that and find out how you react to it and how you need to change to react to it. For instance, when I took one of the classes, I told one of the instructors, and he said, “What’s wrong with your game?” I said, “When I get finished with the game, I’m dead tired. I have to go lay down or I’m just out of energy.” And I said, “I think it’s because I’m eighty-two now and I’m older. My stamina is not what it used to be.” He said, “Baloney! What it is, is you’re using your mental energy for four and a half hours going around the golf so that you’re dead tired mentally by the time you get through with the round, so you’ve got to think about other things besides the golf game.” Well, that applies to life. We sit and stew and worry about things we can do nothing about, and all it does is sap our mental energy, so we can learn a great deal by studying the game of golf about our life generally.

Lou Cannon: Let me just ask you to expand on that. What is it more specifically that you learn? Give us an example, if you can.

George Steffes: Golf is a repetitive sport. You only do the golf swing and it’s handled by parts of your brain that are not conscious to you, but we’re conscious intellectual beings. You and I, when something goes a little bit wrong, our thinking to ourselves: How can I make it better? If you do that with golf with your prefrontal cortex taking command, you disconnect the parts of your brain that are responsible for doing repetitive motion, and so what you need to do is to learn what to think about when you get up to hit the golf shot, so that you’re not thinking about the wrong thing. Instead, you’re thinking about things that are productive.

Lou Cannon: What are you thinking about when you get up the swing?

George Steffes: I’m thinking about what do I need to do here. That’s the first thing I’m thinking about: the golf shot I have to make now. I’m thinking about what’s the shot I have to take. Then I’m thinking about what does a shot like that look like. I visualize the shot physically in my head. What does it look like imagining the ball doing what I want it to do? Third, I take a practice to what that golf swing would… to make that good shot would feel like. Then I get up and hit the ball. When I’ve done those three things, I haven’t been thinking about, “Oh, gosh! I hope I don’t shoot this shot like I did the last shot” or “I hope I don’t get the ball over there in the water on the right.” I focus in on what I need to do to make a good shot. I don’t worry about “Am I going to win this match or lose this match?” I worry about “I’m going to make the best shot I can for every shot.”

Lou Cannon: Is there a practical way in life that you can do this? I’ve seen baseball-hitting instructors talk about seeing the hit before you actually connect. You’re seeing yourself hitting the ball. That’s complicated, because it’s just a split-second thing. I understand that notion in sports, but what would be a practical application of it in life?

George Steffes: I haven't thought about that before. Well, why I'm doing that is so that I'm thinking about the process that I'm using rather than the outcome that I'm using. If I'm lobbying a bill, if I'm wasting my time worrying about, "Oh, gosh! We're going to lose this, and then I'm going to lose my client," rather than how do I win this issue, I'm wasting energy on the wrong things.

Lou Cannon: That makes sense.

George Steffes: I'll tell you: One thing I found out which helped me earlier in this interview is one of the basic personality traits that we, as human beings, have is our trustworthiness, our trust-ness, as opposed to our suspicion. It's one personality trait at which, number one, at this end of the trait is somebody who's really trusting, and on the other end, a person who's really suspicious. What we're told about as coaches is, if you have somebody who's really suspicious, you better say everything perfectly accurately, because the minute they catch you doing something that's not accurate, the suspicious person is going to turn you off, and so it's good for coaching but it's good for life too.

Lou Cannon: What about the trusting person?

George Steffes: The trusting person is Ronald Reagan. That's what I discovered in studying this was that the… And when I took the course, when you take this course, you have to take a personality test. It's not a golf test. It's a standardized psychological test.

Lou Cannon: This is a test you give, administer?

George Steffes: I do give it. Yeah, but it's a standardized test. Just a minute… When I got through with... It was a five-day course. When I got through with the course, a husband and wife, the wife is a registered psychologist and the husband is a psychologist, and they teach this to professional golfers, and I was taking it so I can teach it to recreational golfers. When we got through, we went and had lunch and he said during the lunch, "We never talked about your psychological profile." I said yes. He said, "What struck me is you've been a lobbyist for fifty years, and your strongest personality trait is trust. How can a lobbyist, after fifty years, be a trusting person?" I said, "It's very simple. I know exactly what they're going to do, and I trust that's what they're going to do." Generally right.

Lou Cannon: Jesse Unruh famously said that money is the mother's milk of politics. Has the influence of money in lobbying in Sacramento changed since the five years you were Legislative Secretary for Governor Reagan?

George Steffes: Well, it's obviously changed some, because we had Prop 9 between the time I started and the time I quit, so…

Lou Cannon: Which?

George Steffes: That stopped lobbyists from personally donating money and limited the amounts of money they could spend. After Proposition 9, we could've never let Bob Moretti use our plane for Proposition 1A.

Lou Cannon: But beyond that?

George Steffes: Beyond that, I think that, in my mind, is probably the primary reason that real people in this society don't trust politicians, because they think money runs things. Part of it is perception, and part of it is reality. I think it has gotten worse. The dollars are much higher, first of all. When I started back in '67, what was it—a hundred dollars to go to a fundraiser? Gray Davis' first fundraiser, his controller was twenty-five hundred dollars, and this was twenty, thirty years ago. The dollar amounts have changed.

Term limits exacerbated the idea. When government officials got to their new job, the first thing they started thinking about was what are they going to get at their next job, because they knew they were term-limited, and so the first thing they started doing was raising money to be able to finance their next election campaign. That's changed somewhat, but I think the atmosphere of "I've got to spend so much of my time as a public official raising money for reelection or my next job" has certainly not gotten any better and it's probably gotten worse.

Lou Cannon: Well, we're market of society and it's unrealistic to think that business interests, they're not going to spend money for their objectives, but is there any way to… It seems it's obsessive now. First of all, the amounts of money are so great that legislators, he could raise money in the 60's and 70's that he didn't have to go far. He could raise a lot of money in his district, and people knew him. Now, he can't. Is there any corrective to this? Either a legislative corrective or a way of public financing?

George Steffes: Well, I think that's… I've always not been very hot on public financing, but I think that's one way around this. What I tend to agree with you is just and over-interest in raising money.

Lou Cannon: And it sort of drives out. It's like a… It drives out the discussions about raising money and the incessant focus on it drives out discussions on policy. Doesn't it? Don't you agree?

George Steffes: Yeah, the last couple of weeks, I ran onto a former legislator on the street of Sacramento, and he knew who I was and said that I had once coached his son in golf and we had a nice, folksy conversation. I said, "What are you doing these days?" He said, "Oh, I'm running for ex-office in the next election." Within the next half hour that I got back to my office, I had a phone call from his fundraiser, soliciting funds for his next race. I mean it just kind of jangled

me that he didn't really do anything bad or untoward, but what we were talking about didn't have anything to do with his next race. It had to do with the fact that I coached his son in golf and years passed and it was one kind of a conversation that it immediately becomes "How about some money for my next campaign?" I think that's a little overemphasizing the need to do that.

Lou Cannon: Tell us something that we don't know about you, about George Steffes.
George Steffes: I'm immortal.

Lou Cannon: You are?

George Steffes: I tell my wife that all the time when she says I'm getting old. I tell her, "When you're immortal, it really doesn't matter that much."

Lou Cannon: I just want to…

George Steffes: My interest is… One of the things you may have asked me is "Why is golf important to you?" Because what's important to me at eighty-two years old is staying active mentally and physically, so that I can live as long as I'm going to live, and golf is an excellent way to do that. The study of golf -- I'm continually studying and doing things mentally about the game, and a big part of it is not just so I could enjoy the game of golf, but so that I can lengthen my life if possible.

Lou Cannon: We've talked about a lot of different subjects about legislature and a lot about Reagan, and I just wonder if there's any… I always… I like to call you for things because it seemed to me that you reflected on what was happening more than a lot of people I call. You just didn't give me the answer that was the flavor of the month. I just wondered whether you have any thoughts you'd like to share about where California is now, where we're going as a society, because we're a great place now and we're all quite different than many places in the country, both in whom we vote for and our policies, what we think. Where do you think we're headed?

George Steffes: Well, my worry about where we're headed is what we were just talking about, not only that we talk about money for politics, but materialism in the state is, I think, a great danger that we get much too much into; what material goods we're going to get by working. I really worry about that a lot.

Lou Cannon: Is there anything you're encouraged by? Is there anything that you see in the society that is helpful?

George Steffes: Every place I go, I see good human beings trying to do the right thing, and that's what really encourages me. Going back to Reagan, what made his staff good was the fact that he treated them like they were good people. He

trusted them and treated them that way, and that made them better. I think there's a lot of signs that that goes on in California and probably every place else all the time.