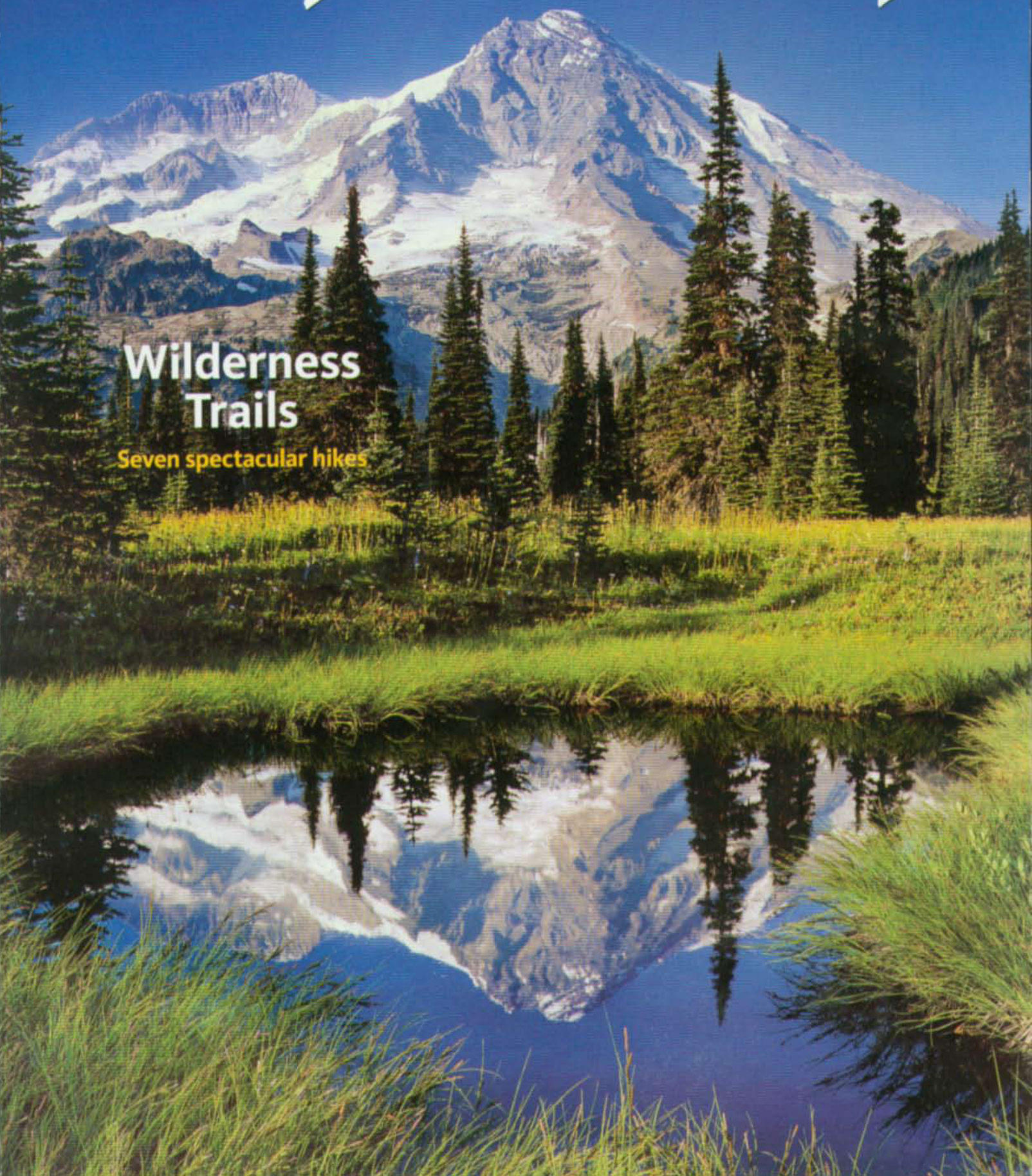


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Culling the Collection

Sorting golf shirts evokes nostalgia | BY JEFF WALLACH

It's early summer and my wife is on a minor rampage of cleaning and culling. I notice clothes and throw pillows and housewares gathering in the "For Goodwill" section of the basement. Any day now I'll get the look, which tells me it's time to start clearing out some of my own things, too.

I have never been a collector—no stacks of concert-ticket stubs or armies of salt and pepper shakers from foreign countries or displays of thimbles bought at national park gift shops. And I haven't been particularly successful in collecting trophies from sporting events I've competed in, either, but I have inadvertently amassed a sports collection of another kind: approximately 100 golf shirts gifted by resorts or manufacturers I happened to be writing about or bestowed as prizes for participating in scrambles and corporate golf outings. Taking inventory, I discover: nine shirts in the laundry; one that I'm wearing; one that I never opened; three long-sleeve; 56 of assorted color, pattern, style and logo; 26 vests, sweaters, wind shirts, fleeces and underlayers; and one pair of plaid pants inexplicably proffered in the gift bag for playing in the pro-am at the Waste Management Phoenix Open. Don't even ask how many golf hats I own.

The shirts occupy four shelves in my armoire, stacked in deep piles. Much as I hate to agree with my wife, it's clearly time for some to move on. So I'm on the floor with the apparel around me, trying to determine which must leave the shirt family I've built and protected and maintained through the rain and wind and sun of golf rounds played in more than 30 countries on five continents over three decades. While I take some comfort in the fact that the shirts will enjoy a new life with someone who needs them more than I do, I consider skipping this entire endeavor because it's just too hard to choose.

I reason thus: Get rid of the old-style knit cotton shirts with

tight sleeves, but then realize that the red one from Boca Raton Resort in Florida was given to me during the last round of golf I ever played with my father before he passed. I consider jettisoning all the white ones, which I almost never wear, but one is from a trip to Hapuna Beach Prince Hotel in Hawai'i that I took with my wife, and another is a shirt made from recycled coconut husks, and that's too cool to let go of. A shirt with the logo of a company

that went out of business years ago now seems ironical and insidious. Another is in an apple green that I really like and that goes great with everything and that seems to be a never-replicated color. I just outright love the brown one with alligator variegations, the black TravisMathew shirt with epaulets, and several procured in Ireland and Scotland, which quietly convey golf bragging rights. I can think of a good reason to save every one.

The fact is, the shirts are much more than thread and dye and a clever logo. They are interwoven with memories of where I got them, of rounds played with friends, and with business associates who eventually became friends. Some came from trips to exotic locales such as Vietnam and the Ivory Coast; another recalls a visit to Twin Warriors in the Santa Fe area when my wife and I were dating. Several are from courses in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley that have challenged me many a time. One is from The Revere Golf Club outside Las Vegas, where I actually designed one of the golf holes—Lexington No. 11, with the help of the professional course architects—for a story I was writing.

After some consideration I eventually haul a pile of hats to the basement, hoping my wife might see this as an ample compromise, and that the shirts—like teenagers before college—can linger for one final round together, one last season, before going forth in the world without me.

Jeff Wallach has authored five books, including Beyond the Fairway and Driven to Extremes.



My Unlikely Sports Hero

81-year-old soccer player inspires teammates | BY JEFF WALLACH

On a rainy night this winter that was cold enough that you hoped it would just drop three more degrees and start snowing, I was headed to a men's weekly over-50 pickup soccer game in Portland—a game held, inexplicably, outdoors. As the rain pounded on my windshield I thought to myself: Nobody else is going to come out on a night like this.

But when I pulled up to the field I spotted a red sports car in the parking lot and out of it climbed Lajos Balogh in his knee-high socks and soccer jersey. I watched him shuffle from the car and into the dark, down toward the lighted field below.

Balogh is 81 years old, and when you talk about an 81-year-old grandfather dribbling, it doesn't usually refer to moving a soccer ball down a wet pitch crusty with ice. When he receives the ball from his teammates he often finds himself with an open-field run toward the goal. Defenders flee from his path as if he were Godzilla storming Tokyo. Nobody wants to bring an 81-year-old's playing career to an end through clumsy defense. Better to let him score, which he does with some regularity—to cheers of “Go, Einstein!” because Balogh bears some resemblance to the legendary genius.

“I am fast,” he explains demurely when I sit down to chat with him one afternoon over hot chocolate—the drink he credits for his longevity. “And I’m getting faster—as the years go by faster, I have to become faster to keep up! If I didn’t get to a ball this time, I will five years from now.”

Balogh not only resembles Einstein but is a kind of genius in his own right. Born in Hungary in 1931, he picked up the violin at age 3 after hearing his father play in the other room while he was supposed to be napping. When asked early in life what he wanted to be when he grew up, he answered: an archbishop. Forced to leave his country after the Soviet invasion in 1956, he worked as a professional musician throughout Europe before immigrating to the United States in 1966. He has been on the faculty at

Marylhurst University for most of the time since, and founded the Metropolitan Youth Symphony and Portland Festival Symphony in addition to playing violin in the Oregon Symphony for many years.

He played a pick-up soccer game once while studying at the famous Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest—against a very good local team. “We [the ad hoc team of music students] beat them 4–2. We didn’t know what we were doing. And neither did they

know what we were doing,” he recalls. But for most of Balogh’s young life his father didn’t allow him to participate in sports, saying he could break a finger and end his musical career.

Balogh began playing soccer regularly when he was 65, explaining, “I’m a lifelong learner.”

His views on music could easily be applied to how he sees the beautiful game: “It’s a universal language. I can sit down with Russians, Chinese, Israelis and Arabs. You don’t even have to talk to connect.” And so it is with the sport known as “football” to most of the world.

Balogh is largely retired from playing music (though he still conducts regularly), but not from soccer. Many of the other players he began with a decade and a half ago have already quit the sport, and recently he became the Portland league’s oldest player.

He does not fear injury and claims the game is his form of medication. “I love it, and therefore it is good for me,” he says. “I will never stop. You don’t stop playing because you are old. You become old because you stop playing.”

It is part of a wider philosophy of potential and positivism. “We are at the beginning of what is possible,” he says, and though he’s referring to mankind, this is also how he sees himself.

If you are an athlete of any age, playing any sport with any degree of skill, Lajos Balogh’s type of experience is what you hope lies ahead: an 81-year-old man running down an open field, white hair flying wildly behind him, only a soccer ball between him and the goal.

Jeff Wallach lives in Portland.

