THE FARMING LIFE IS NO COUNTRY CLUB:

Can playing golf be considered an agricultural activity? If my grandfather Anderson -- a strapping, weather-beaten man who earned his living behind a plow -- were asked that question when he was alive, he probably would have laughed for a week. Then he would have asked who on God's great green earth would ask such a stupid question. That's just the way he talked.

The question may be stupid, but the questioner is not. He's a landscaper from Groton with a pretty good sense of casino economics. He wants to convert an absolutely gorgeous 235-year-old farm in Preston into a golf course. There's only one small problem. The development rights for this property were sold to the Connecticut taxpayers in 1986.

At the time, the goal was to set aside this piece of land to help ensure that New England's rural heritage landscape would remain part of the scenery. More important, preserving the farm would guarantee that the soil resources on which future agriculture depend will not be pre-empted by home sites, roads, shopping malls and the like. Yet, in spite of the fact that the development rights had been sold, this property was being converted from preserved farm to golf course last fall when Attorney General Blumenthal brought the project to a screeching halt.

At stake are potential development scenarios for the 211 other farms already in the farmland preservation program. Will they become golf courses as well? And will this someday lead to pitch-and-putt pastures or miniature golf meadows?

The developer's argument for converting the land from farm to golf course was reported in a front-page story of The Courant this past November. When I first read the story, I nearly wept with humor over the logic that seems to claim that golfing and farming are one and the same. If this were true, then why don't foursomes in the clubhouse look forward to a few hours of milking after a round of golf?

Perhaps it isn't the logic that's confusing. Maybe it's the language of suburbanization. Consider the word "development," which used to mean modifying the land toward some purpose. Now it means building on land. An early-19th-century farm, like those replicated at Old Sturbridge Village and other agricultural tourist sites, was every bit as developed as the suburbs that have since replaced them. A managed forest is every bit as developed as a cornfield. A golf course development may be a good idea in some situations, but that doesn't make it agriculture.

How about the phrase "open space"? Where I come from, open space has something to do with either a big-sky horizon or a cleared patch in the forest. In other words, open space has more atmosphere, a place a cowboy would appreciate. But on the East Coast, the term "open space" really means land that isn't developed. For example, a publicly owned patch of woods surrounded by privately owned fairways, sand traps, water hazards and greens would be considered open space.

Fortunately, the word "farm" hasn't changed that much. Farms remain places that grow commodities either from the soil or, more recently, from water (fish farms and hydroponic tomatoes). A wine farm is called a vineyard; an olive farm a grove; an apple farm an orchard; and a chicken farm a ranch, regardless of whether the birds are free-range or spend their entire lives indoors. Mushroom farming is also done indoors, in the dark and on you-know-what. Farms need not grow food. Sod farms grow sod. Tree farms grow trees. Tobacco farms grow the devil weed.

In other words, farming is about growing plants or raising animals, not about chasing a little white ball around an old pasture. I should know. I was a farmhand as a young man. Now I try to play golf
at least once every few years, whether I feel like it or not, and my handicap is at least 20. From these experiences, I have learned that golfing isn't farming, and that the main thing that grows on a golf course is frustration. I agree with Mark Twain who once said, "Golf is a good walk spoiled."

Let's not spoil our farmland preservation program.