

Contents

Preface . . ix

Part One. Golf as Memoir

Taking It Back Inside . . 3

Night Golf . . 5

Sam . . 14

Girls and Golf in Pinehurst . . 23

Golfless in Berkeley . . 29

Pure Wine . . 40

Cheating at Golf . . 47

Part Two. Lives of the Golfers

What Do Golfers Want? . . 55

Pro-trait #1: Arnold Palmer . . 61

Light My Fivewood . . 63

Pro-trait #2: Jack Nicklaus . . 66

The Meaning of Tiger Woods . . 67

Pro-trait #3: Bobby Jones . . 74

Pro-trait #4: John Daly . . 75

Pro-trait #5: Charles Howell III . . 76

Mike Austin, "Mr. 515" . . 77

Pro-trait #6: Gary Player . . 82

Pro-trait #7: Fred Couples . . 83

Big Shots at Bighorn (July 31, 2002) . . 84

Pro-trait #8: Craig Stadler . . 89

Pro-trait #9: Raymond Floyd's Swing . . 90

Pro-trait #10: Annika Sorenstam . . 91

Can You Have Too Much Love? . . 92

Pro-trait #11: Se Ri Pak . . 96

Canvassing the Course . . 97

Pro-trait #12: Tom Watson . . 101

Part Three. The Golf Swing as the Axis of the World

- Golf Mundi . . 105
- The Swing Sculpture . . 107
- “I’ve Got It!” (or the Madness of “Y”) . . 109
- Bashō’s Haiku and the Three-ring Swing . . 112
 - Fingerprint Swings . . 115
 - Dream Lessons . . 119
 - On Phil’s Watch . . 129
- The Zen Puppet Swing . . 132
 - Telling Golf’s Secret . . 134
 - Seeing the Light . . 136
 - Bending Hogan . . 138
- The Pathological Driving Range . . 142
 - Piano Lessons to Nobody . . 146

Part Four. Golf as a Tool Chest

- Faithless to the Fourteen . . 153
- The Half-degree Solution . . 156
 - Strokes of Genius . . 159
 - About Face . . 162
- Vestigial Headcovers . . 165

Part Five. Golf and the Soul

- The Golf Course as a Work of Art . . 169
 - Golf and Creativity . . 176
 - Golf and Spirituality . . 183
 - Bob’n Around . . 194
- Golf’s Imponderables (and an Answer
from Jack Kerouac) . . 201
- Winter Scene with Figures Playing Kolf . . 205
- Source Acknowledgments . . 209

Taking It Back Inside

I waited until my mother had driven away. Then, after opening the front door, peeking down the road, and seeing her white Ford Falcon disappear, I lined up my eight-iron shot. Standing smack in the middle of the living room, with a plastic golf ball sitting on the carpet, I took dead aim through the small opening that skirted the chandelier and led through the back door to my target, a square of screen at the back of the porch.

At age thirteen, I had been hitting balls inside for well over a year. Eight-iron shots were my favorite—even plastic practice balls zipped off the clubface at an ideal trajectory. I loved the unique contour of that particular club, its braveness as it stood distinguished from the rest of the set. It had none of the angular assertiveness of the seven iron (which reminded me of a proud slice of pie), or even the bulbous, bloated roundness of the wedges. No, the eight iron, viewed at address, appeared to be exactly what it was: a jewel-like machine of measurement.

Over the past year, a small worn spot had begun to appear on the carpet, and while the blemish didn't please my mom, perhaps the thought that one day I would make millions on tour and buy her a dream house had made her overlook it.

My next swing, however, would prove a swipe no one could ignore. The backswing seemed ordinary enough, a decent little turn. And the transition was good too. Other kids had dogs; my swing was my faithful servant. The club dropped into the slot just as it was supposed to, and with a well-timed release I squared the blade forged from steel.

Next to my living room practice tee sat the family piano. Now a plastic practice golf ball yields a soft, light sensation when struck reminiscent of patting a balloon. On that fateful swing, I felt that little *whiff*, all right, which was followed by a most unexpected *THUD*. I

had caught the side of the piano solidly with my eight iron, which had gone on to bury itself deep within the instrument's chamber, leaving only the silver shaft exposed. With my grip horrifically frozen in place, the image must have resembled a tableau in a French farce.

I didn't like to think of myself as a delinquent child. I was a good student, a good athlete. I ate my vegetables, didn't smoke, and felt compassion for kids less fortunate than I was. But knowing that I had done something wrong, I felt the criminal instinct take over.

Off I went on my bicycle to the candy store, then to the art supply shop across the street. I saw my mom's car parked in the supermarket lot and recalled her saying she was going to stop by her friend Phyllis's house after shopping. I figured I had an hour and a half to carry out my plan.

Back home I had no time to lose. I chewed a wad of gum and stuck it in the vertical "divot" slashed in the piano. Then, with the ecstatic freedom of Van Gogh, I painted the pink gum brown, hoping to match the hue of the instrument.

The end of this unfortunate escapade came swiftly. Mom walked in, groceries in hand, spotted the oozing gum dripping cheap watercolor paint on the side of the family treasure, and threw a fit. My dad, who on the golf course crooned over every great golf shot I hit like a tenor warbling "Sunny Boy" with a pint of Guinness in his hand, suddenly rejected the idea that golf encompassed spiritual values. My backside made the abrasion on the piano seem like the surface of a mountain lake at dawn.

The scar in the piano never healed, but mine did, and I grew up to be a golfer. My passion for the game has deepened and ripened and flashed hot and cold in a love affair that transcends the mere enjoyment of playing a game. Rather, it models the actual root of the word *passion*, based in the idea of suffering and the recognition that only from recognizing the pain of others can we develop compassion. Indeed, every time I play golf, as I see my own frustration mirrored in the exasperation of my playing partners, I remember what I learned when I was a kid swinging in the living room: The world is not a stage. It is a golf course.

Night Golf

I have heard many years of telling,
And many years should see some change.

The ball I threw while playing in the park
Has not yet hit the ground.

—Dylan Thomas, “Should Lanterns Shine”

The thwack of a golf club colliding with a ball is an out-of-place and dislocating sound in a suburban Long Island neighborhood, especially when heard in the middle of the night. Yet I forced my father to listen and respond to this peculiar percussion on more than one occasion back when I was a teenager growing up in Freeport along the Island’s South Shore. I’ve already chronicled my exploits with swatting whiffle balls across my living room and the story of how one of these particular practice sessions ended with the clubhead of my eight iron embedded in the side of the family piano. So you would think a boy, even one as obsessed with golf as I was, would have learned the limitations of playing a game meant for the expansive outdoors inside the strictures of a modest split-level home.

And sure, I abided by such obviousness—for maybe three, possibly four, months after that. But then I saw a practice net advertised in the glossy pages of *Golf Digest* (little did I know or even fantasize that one day my articles would appear there!), and that net ignited my unlimited appetite for unfettered practice once again.

I confess that ads in golf magazines mesmerized me. They glowed with an absolute purity, the way Renaissance painters crafted halos glowing over the head of the Virgin Mary or other saints and angels in their canvases. I can still recall dreamily gazing at one such ad of a chestnut brown persimmon Kenneth Smith driver: it had a funny

hosel, without any whipping or wrapping string, presaging both the ferruleless stainless steel hosels on PING irons and the bore-through hoselless drivers from Callaway still years in the future.

Even more compelling, perhaps leaning toward the fetishistic, were the pair of brown wing tip golf shoes I goggled at in those pages. What did those dots formed into a triangular pattern on the shoe's toes *mean*? I remember thinking to myself. Having never seen anything so handsome in my life, the shoes clearly stood as symbols of a nascent adult masculinity into which, as an adolescent boy, I was beginning to confidently stride. The odd thing is that I didn't really want the driver or the shoes at all. I just wanted to want them.

Yet I can honestly say that this practice net in *Golf Digest* all but called my name out as its rightful owner. In fact, I couldn't believe such a thing existed; it represented the perfect vehicle to transport my indoor practice requirements instantly out of the overcrowded living room (that damned piano ruined everything) and onto the back porch. I could set it up there and hit real golf balls into it. Those wimpy whiffle balls that felt like egg shells when I hit them and flew with the sickening fizzing sound of a wounded duck would become just a faint memory of a more primitive urge to hone my golf skills.

My dad said yes, he would buy the net for me. He probably would have gotten the wing tip shoes and the Kenneth Smith driver for me too. But, while I suspected owning things of such transcendent beauty would ruin them for me, a practice net with its airy imperfections not only seemed nonthreatening but required my love and attentive ownership.

The thing came in a big, broad cardboard box, which I ripped open like a predatory animal, hungry for improvement (anthropologists say sports in general arouse ancestral and archetypal memories of the hunt that still remain, however vestigially, in a human's genes).

I'm not sure whether the hitting mat of artificial grass came with the net or not—probably not, which meant it was an added expense for my poor old dad that, evidently, he incurred because hitting balls off the thin indoor-outdoor carpet that lined the cement floor of

our porch would not have given me optimum feedback on the centered or oblique quality of my hits. If Ben Hogan could winter in the Palm Springs area just so he could practice on the great turf there, a little Long Island boy with dreams of dead-solid impact deserved a pathetic little patch of brittle, green golf ball mat.

Unfurled, the practice net stood before me like a majestic meshed silver screen, waiting to receive the projections of my golf game's hopes and fantasies in the form of nine-iron shots, five-iron shots, three-wood and driver shots, even chip and low-flying punch pitch shots, anything I wanted (save the high-flying soft lob shot) I could hit into the net, again with real golf balls!

Our screened porch sat a good five feet off the ground, and I imagined that perch as the elevated tee that majestically overlooks Carmel Bay bordering Northern California's Monterey Peninsula—the 18th tee at Pebble Beach Golf Links, perhaps the most hallowed hitting area in all the golf world. Even that storied plot of grass had nothing on my patch of carpeted concrete though. To complete the day-dream, I even imagined the small artificial grass on my hitting mat as newly laid turf.

Little did I know that years later, while studying *The Golfing Machine*, I would read that Homer Kelley, its author, believed that a golfer could best improve his or her swing by hitting balls indoors into a net, because it eliminated the distracting obsession with ball flight that is inevitable when practicing outdoors. Of course, one could argue that a screened-in porch would qualify as being only *half* indoors. But even if my swing improved 50 percent, that would be better than harpooning my eight-iron into the side of the piano when hitting within the cocoon of my living room.

I can still hear the thunder of those first balls as I fired them into the net and feel my amazement at this simplest of gravity-defying devices as the net, while catching and dropping the ball, allowed me to finish the ball's flight in my imagination. In its muffled, cupped deflection of the ball's flying force, the net offered reassurance that anything on earth was possible. It said that all one needed to alter

the forces of the universe, which seemingly rendered one helpless to shape one's own destiny, was a willingness to exercise—or build products that sprang from—the same kind of jerry-rigging imagination that had invented the net.

Thus a Flemish boy became a folk legend by sticking his finger into an Amsterdam dike. Ben Franklin hooked a key to a kite, and his discovery of electricity changed the outer world every bit as much as Moses or Buddha had transformed the human soul. In the annals of golf's spiritual evolution, this driving net belongs squarely (actually, rectangularly) in a similar category, because who, before its invention, could even *dream* of smashing full-blown golf shots while standing in a porch?

But that is exactly what I did—day and night—that summer back in 1969, the year my dad made that purchase on my game's behalf.

I lacked neither motivation nor opportunity to try some new swing technique out on—or, rather, *into*—the net. A tip in *Golf Digest* to “retain the angle” between the left arm and the clubshaft, for example, led to morning, evening, and even midnight net sessions, frustrating at first, as I tried to execute a five-iron swing with the wrists held back well into the downswing. Initially, this holding back had the paradoxical effect of making me release the club too early, which sent it driving steeply downward into the mat.

Shocks exploded up my arm and body from the cement floor under the mat. If I had been on an actual grass driving range (fat chance finding one of those at a public course on Long Island), I would have dug a hole deep enough into the ground in which to bury that net. However, as my wrists became more and more sore, my hold on the club loosened and softened, and as a result, lo! I found that such a supple grip was the key to retaining the angle!

The night in 1969 when the astronauts landed on the moon, I was sitting in front of the TV with a golf club in my hand. And wouldn't you know it! The first thing they did up there was play golf. Alan Shepard unfolded a collapsible six iron and struck the longest fairway bunker shot in history, with a perfectly timed, one-handed swing.

I thought that maybe practicing one hand at a time might benefit my motion too. After all, if a dude bundled up in the inflexible piping of a spacesuit could do it, for a seventeen-year old like me, with a normal range of motion and exceptional hand-eye coordination, a one-armed swing should have been a piece of cake.

My first attempt propelled the club—appropriately, I suppose—out of its normal orbit, and the ball, caressing against the hosel (of the six iron, of course), shanked at a dead right angle to the suddenly useless net. The ball ricocheted off of the house's wall, which formed the fourth side of the porch, and bounded around like a molecule shot with a laser in a physical chemist's experiment. The ball managed to touch every object in the room *except* the net and me, and how it didn't punch a hole in the porch's tall screens remains one of the great unsolved puzzles of my life.

But it's a good thing it didn't, because if it had it would certainly have evoked the specter of the eight iron-ripped piano in my dad's memory, and, if he didn't have me arrested right there on the spot, he certainly would have dismantled the net in front of me and chopped it into pieces small enough to burn in the den's fireplace. By some kind of lunar grace, though, I would live to practice my swing into that net for another morning, afternoon, and night.

Actually, that moon landing with its celestial sand shot began to exert an odd kind of golf gravity on me. More specifically, a somnambulistic trance began pulling me out of bed each night around midnight, when I would slip on some tennis shoes, unconsciously grab a club from my golf bag in my closet, and waltz down to the porch. Somehow my mom didn't seem to mind a half dozen or so golf balls perpetually lying on the floor of the porch, so my ammunition was always just waiting for me make a few wake-up swings before I started smacking one ball after another into the net.

I don't know the physics of it, but I suspect dark air conducts sound more efficiently than does air streamed with light, because the decibel level of my thwacking definitely approached deafening. Indeed, the oxymoron was anything but lost on my hard-working

dad, as what to me sounded like the sweet music of dead-solid impact evidently vibrated with a more egregious buzzing in his ears, as if some newfangled alarm system signaling a danger previously uncategorized or even imagined rocked the entire house in warning. In other words, the sound of my hitting golf balls into the practice net on the porch woke my dad up.

Not one for theatrics, my dad expressed himself simply, clearly, and honestly. He also had a tremendous sense of humor, which he used to show affection for and trust in people. In fact, his use of humor worked as a kind of barometer; if he felt comfortable with a person he had just met, he would risk being funny with them right away. If he didn't trust a new acquaintance, he'd clam up and become as dour and indirect as a stockbroker trying to explain to his or her investor just why the market had dropped 247 points that day (not much humor there).

Well, obviously my dad knew me well and trusted me as much as any father can trust his teenage son, so a comfort level between us was a nonfactor in the ensuing exchange. He simply stood there in his long, straight, nondescript sleeping gown and, with his arm outstretched, at once rigid and confidently relaxed, said, "Give me the club."

He didn't even address me by name, which hurt my feelings a little bit. "Andy, give me the club," would have felt better. It might have taken a bit of the edge off of his demand and given it just the tiniest air of an empathetic request. But no, there was no room for negotiation, and maybe it was just too late at night (or early in the morning) for a more informal encounter.

So I gave him my club, which happened to be my four wood, the same Arnold Palmer laminated (or was it persimmon?) model that would forge a mirror of recognition between Amy Alcott and me as we hit balls on the same range at Pinehurst just a year later. There it went into my dad's sleepy paws, and it wasn't that I felt I would never see the club again—after all, my dad loved golf too and, as I was the one who had introduced him to the game, he would need

me to have it back so we could go play together. It wasn't even that I felt guilty or punished—though I should have felt responsible for keeping my parents awake. It was that, even with my pajamas on, I felt completely *naked* without the club.

Years later I would read that the great jazz saxophonist John Coltrane had a horn in every room in his house so that wherever he was and whatever he was doing he could easily grab it and work on his fingering. There is also a neurological or psychiatric symptom called “hypergraphia,” which manifests itself as the compulsive need to always write. I wondered why they didn't just call these people writers, as anyone who has ever written a book, as I'm doing right now, knows that the task feels limitless. You grab the pen and start writing, and you feel as if you will never stop.

My friend Anne Rice, the novelist, refers to this process as “essential dream,” meaning that through a trancelike state, one merges with one's writing, as if one were simultaneously viewing and creating a dream in the very process of writing the words down.

Certainly someone like Vijay Singh, Tom Kite, Lee Trevino, Ben Hogan—name your favorite inveterate practice hound, golf ball beater, range rat type of personality, call them what you will—probably feels soothed, healed, and whole with a golf club in his or her hands. If that's the case, I'd have to put myself into their class or, I should say, *clinic* as well.

Where was I without my trusty four wood? Standing alone in the middle of the night in the middle of a screened-in porch in the middle of my youth, in the middle of the summer, with a useless driving range net staring me straight in my face and my father's oddly reassuring footsteps trudging up the steps, with my golf club in tow. Yes, where was I?

The next day, when I woke up and went downstairs to eat my cereal, to my astonishment (though not, ironically, to my surprise) the practice net lay packed away in its cardboard box, as if a newborn baby had crawled back into his or her mother's womb.

I obviously needed another way to satisfy the immediate urge—indeed, the *need*—to work on my golf swing when and where I wanted. Can you imagine John Coltrane sitting down to watch the evening news without a saxophone?

That night, as I lay in my bed, clubless and netless, I realized that the one thing I still had intact—and that had the capacity to work with such perfect discretionary silence that even my father couldn't take it away from me—was my *imagination*.

My confident and secure dreaming process succinctly reconstructed in my restless mind's eye that eighteenth tee at Pebble Beach, which overlooks the waters of Carmel Bay. It just so happens that my house in Freeport stood on Bayview Avenue—get it? An avenue that overlooks the bay—and my street name too was no metaphorical figure of speech, for there was an actual bay four or five blocks away!

My imagination formulated a plan instantly. All I had to do was get on my bike, take a club, a tee, and a few golf balls, and ride down to the bay. There a perfect little nameless beach awaited me, whose grains of moist sand would certainly have packed themselves into a smooth, flat, and firm surface not unlike—especially when experienced in the middle of the night—a golf course's tee box. More so, because it too sat tangentially to the sea, I figured what I had there was nothing less than a Long Island version of Pebble Beach.

Out from my house I flew on my bike, E.T.-like, through the neighborhood of modest houses to keep my tee time, about 3:18 a.m. on that beach's first (and, I suppose, only) tee.

I would use a basic physics calculation to measure the quality of my shots into the bay: the more time that elapsed between the click of contact and the splash of the ball in the water, the longer my shot. Certainly, determining the left or right curve of my shot would be harder to do, but I didn't mind; I was willing to sacrifice a sense of the accuracy of my drive as long as I felt certain of its (approximate) distance. Remember, as recently as the night before, I had been able to drive the ball only twelve feet or so forward before the net absorbed and annihilated the potential distance of my blow. In other

words, my interest in and connection with the great outdoors had been restored!

So I hit my shot. Of course I did. This story has to end someplace, even though I can't honestly say exactly how it did. Did the pause between the hit and the splash last long enough to satisfy me? I can't remember. Was the sensation in my hands at contact solid enough to quiet my body, mind, and soul? It's too long ago to recall. I do know this—that all of this really did happen, though its meaning beyond its being a tale of a young boy's passion for a game remains for me still, so to speak, up in the air.