



GOLF AT AN UNDISCLOSED LOCATION

Reflections On Playing a Game

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Gathered on a ragged tee on the edge of an undisclosed location, the six of us squinted into the low morning sun for a snapshot to mark the occasion. Too early, my eyes said. Too sore, my body said.

Ready or not, this was to be the fulfillment of a much-anticipated round of golf. For several years, we had seen this links-like patch in the distance, private and out of reach. Now, as our host eased the black Suburban through the unmarked farm gate, swung round a small green hung on a cliff overlooking a broad, grey-sand beach, past an incongruous fire truck and on by another vast, rolling putting surface, the excitement rose to a shudder of anticipation.

Where the road ended and the course began — no pro shop, no logo golf balls, not even a sign to mark a point of departure — we were met by the course superintendent, a one-man crew of maintenance, security, starter and guide. He collected a small tribute for upkeep and handed out a rough map of the course that seemed to have little correspondence to the landscape that lay before us.

“It’s a little rougher in spots than you’re used to,”
he said, in very evident understatement.

From our perspective on that first teeing ground, perhaps forty feet above the indistinct fairways spread out in front of us, it was an unremarkable view of former pasture land save for the broad vista of blue ocean anchoring a cloudless sky. The parched fescues, bright gold in the early morning light, were dotted with bright green gorse plants, not yet bushes, which lay in wait for the flagrant shot or the one that bounded through the generous fairways, too well struck or too unlucky. Undeterred, we hit away, stiffly in the cool morning, a little unsure of our destination. As we eased into the cadence of the round, walking, hitting, inventing, hoping, the only sounds were the rhythmic clack, clack of our clubs and the insistent pulse of the wind. Golf, like they say at Bandon Dunes, as it was meant to be.

The links at this Undisclosed Location are immensely playable for those with a sense of adventure and, well, play. True, there are some long carries that will challenge the high-handicapper, but nothing is stipulated here. If one doesn't like the carry from the teeing ground — this is not some Victorian anachronism for a tee box, it is simply a flat-tish area for teeing up one's ball — then another may be invented that suits the moment. Just as the course demands malleability from the golfer, so it is malleable in ways almost never found today. Playing from the gold tees on your regular Saturday round? Then go to the gold markers by rote, wherever the grounds crew has set them that day, often askew, no questions asked. Sadly, our sense of play in golf has been hemmed in by our own creations in the name of efficiency, or perhaps ego, and they give us less enjoyment than they might if we could just bring ourselves to loosen the constraints of self-perception that force us into our usual roles as golfers: the capable from the tips, women and children up front and the great mass of us somewhere in-between.

There are well-made arguments for safety and pace of play. But the experience at the Undisclosed Location has given me renewed license for the playful anarchy I experienced as a teenager, when the evening light was filtering through the treetops and the

marshals had long retired for the day. Golf, to be played well in a performance sense, can be a very demanding, precise and technical game. Unless the golfer aspires to a certain self-awareness and self-compassion, the play soon goes out of the game and along with it the real fun of the adventure. Real play in golf demands a spirit of spontaneous invention, tempered by a respect for others. We should make up the tee box from time to time, as we did that day, just to ensure that we can still perceive ourselves as capable of being creative and playful outside the box that the modern golf world insists we inhabit.

The biggest box of all, of course, is score. For the few hours of our trek across this windswept landscape, it felt like the usual markers of performance fell away. As we played from green H to green G, then to green F on the ocean's edge and then to green K back inland, it was evident that for this round of golf, and for this group of golfers, score had little to do with the experience. If it was "about" anything at all, it was about play: the challenge of perception, the creative insight of the moment, the club selection and shot shape. How many shots it took to put the ball in the hole wasn't calculated, at least not publicly, nor was it even mentioned.

Being loosed from scoring that day brought a new-found freedom for us as players. Golf tethered too tightly to score can easily choke the play out of the game for any golfer. Who, with the possibility of a career round tantalizingly close, risks the low cut from under the trees or even thinks of attempting the high draw to a tight pin? Some, but perhaps only when the score for the day is beyond redemption or there's no big prize on the line at the charity scramble. Disconnecting our perceptual apparatus from scoring, to really see the possibilities that might be had if the outcome wouldn't show up on the card brings with it a wonderful freedom to invent the moment instead of reaching for the predictable. Why not try to join concept and execution in search of a memorable outcome? All you have to do is allow yourself to play. Skill and tech-

nique can be discovered, and sometimes taught, but no one can teach the willingness, vulnerability and confidence needed to be creative in the moment.

It takes a strong adult to behave like a natural child.

Depending on how we made up the course that day, we faced at least four blind shots to greens that were surprisingly accommodating to all but the worst of them. It's always a surprise to listen to the antipathy of American golfers, and many golf course architects, to the blind shot. Why this should be so for amateur golfers, who are engaged in playing a game of little life-altering consequence, is puzzling on the face of it. To my sensibility, blind shots – the tee shot at the tenth at Royal County Down, the storied par three “Himalayas” at Prestwick, the approach to the second at Machrahanish come to mind – are among the most interesting in golf, a true test of judgment, execution and, above all, trust in both. We launch our ball into the unknown and hurry over the hill or around the dune to see the outcome, if it can be seen at all. That's play! Those who insist on the perfectly framed view to the pin, or the bounce on manicured fairways that inevitably kicks forward to the target, miss an experience of one of golf's great qualities: the adventure of the unknown, of an outcome beyond our control, for better or for worse.

At the Undisclosed Location, and so too in much of links golf, the known, or what is perceived from the tee or approach, is no less an adventure than the blind shot. The thirteen greens here are for the most part large, swooping affairs, saucer-shaped here, crowned there and, yes, hidden over there. Hidden too are false fronts, false sides and drop-offs from the backs of greens that are often disguised or simply not visible from the fairway. Flagsticks vary in height from four to seven feet, further confounding the eye and complicating the club choice. I came to realize that tens of thousands of golf

shots played to standard pins had hardwired my perceptual apparatus to an expectation of distance. I didn't see what I was looking at. So a cross-country hole of our own invention that day, which looked for all the world to us to measure at least six hundred yards, turned out to be a downwind two-shot, largely because on arriving at the green the Lilliputian pin rose just four feet off the playing surface. Did it matter that our senses had been tricked by design? Not a bit. It was all part of the joy of play, the adventure of the game.

Can we play this game, the every day version of golf, with a spontaneous sense of adventure and imagination? We feel the excitement of the adventure to come as we pack the car, for instance, for a long road trip. There is no trepidation about whether we will drive the car well enough to stay between the lines at high speeds. We set off down the hiking trail full of expectation about the nature and views we will encounter along the way. There are no worries about our ability to swing our arms and move our feet in the proper sequence. But starting down the cart path that leads to the first tee seems to bring out all manner of concerns that need not be part of the game, but are so much a part of being a player these days—the anxieties about performance, that 'past is prologue', that our equipment—physical or mental—is not up to the task. All this chips away at the often shoddy edifice of confidence in ourselves that would, were it something more authentic, allow us to simply play a game with whatever natural skills we possess, accepting whatever outcomes we create or which befall us.

We got a glimpse of the possibilities of play and adventure that day at the Undisclosed Location. I don't recall how many holes we played in those four sublime hours. But by the end of the round we were in a state of exhilarated exhaustion brought on by the magic of the place: the adventure, the invention, and the constant buffeting of the wind. We had found, perhaps, an Undisclosed Location in the heart of compassion for ourselves, and for what, after all, is just a game wanting to be played.