

COURSES IN PLAY I

"It was a staggering example of how a single hole can suddenly snarl round, show its teeth and bite chunks out of the uncertain. . ."

John Stobbs talks about Turnberry in the first of a new series of six articles describing courses with big events.

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THE Walker Cup match at Turnberry goes down in the records not just as the biggest and sharpest disappointment we have yet suffered but also as the occasion upon which for the first time since the war the British Isles side did completely find its feet and show itself capable of matching the Americans, player for player, man for man. The failure on the Saturday was one of psychology: the last horrid uprising of the old underdog complex, which had already been factually exorcised by the home side's triumph in the singles on Friday afternoon. They collapsed on the second day at the mere imagined sight of the ghost of their old fallibility. It was absurd; it was out-of-character; and it will probably never happen to them again.

Examination

The match will also be remembered, though, for how perfectly the course suited the occasion: and how telling proved its examination of top amateurs' weaknesses and strengths. It lies in sandy links-land by the sea: going out through an area of true dune-land stretching in from a great range of steep beach sandhills, rises to a sandy plateau on top of a rock formation, interspersed with beaches, and then comes home on the gentler more inland half of the dune country. The examination progresses in strength from hole to hole. For the 1st, 2nd and 3rd, the player meets three straightforward holes, two of them long ones; the short 4th by the sea is testing to find, but bowl-shaped once the ball hits the green. Then the test toughens. Five is a long dog leg between the dunes; 6 a huge short hole, a full drive from a high tee to a plateau green perched up by the sea-range; 7 and 8

are two good-length holes rising through valleys between dunes, to the 9th: where from a tee out at sea, you drive over a rocky beach to a high fairway on the crest of the hill, torn at by winds, and with the green guarded by a steep mound on one side. Another big drive with the beach yawning on the left, and a maze of sand before the green; a short hole along the top of the rocks by the sea; then inland to a series of holes which look less spectacular but call for firm, bold second shots to get home. The 15th is a long short hole along the edge of a dune-plateau, across which the wind screams again. The last two are good, straightforward 5, 4, finishing holes. But before them comes the 16th; and it was at the 16th that the Walker Cup match was settled.

Challenge

In its place in the round, it is an almost perfect hole, both in concept and lay-out. It comes after two holes with greens reachable only by long shots, and close-set with nasty bunkers; it is followed by a long slog of a 5 through one of Turnberry's dune-land valleys. So . . . the 16th is a perfectly open, simple, slightly downhill drive to a level fairway, hazarded only by a small pot bunker on the left and a little high mound in the rough on the right. The challenge of the hole is reserved for the second shot. This can be anything from a medium iron to a full brassie, depending on the wind. The fairway continues to some 20 yards from the small green, which perches, up at the back, on a minor plateau, but is slightly bowl shaped to hold a long shot.

The actual stroke to it, in fact, could hardly be more straightforward so far as mechanics and result count. But before it there's a strong hazard to the player's mind and eye: a deep, precipitous, grassy gully with a little stream at the bottom of it. It cannot in any way whatsoever affect a properly-hit shot to the green, since it all lies well below the level of the green and the front edge of the green is absolutely unguarded and simple—just a line where the grass is mown on the top of the up-slope from the gully.

It is just the sort of hole to catch a man under nervous pressure in his match. And it did. Down into this gully on the final day went: in the foursomes: Bonallack (under clubbing), Lunt (under clubbing); and again in the singles: Bonallack (wood hit thin), and Lunt (full wood, short by inches). In the foursomes, too, after a bad drive by Green, Saddler had to play short; and in the singles Saddler, going all out for length from the tee, topped his drive. These six strokes were alone enough to settle the whole match; and they came to men who knew the hole backwards. They did not happen to the Americans, who never once fell for the hole's hazard.

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What had happened was that since the Friday the wind veered round; and where the 16th had been comfortably in reach of a mid-iron on the Friday, it lengthened itself to two full woods for the Saturday. It was a staggering example of how a single hole can suddenly snarl round, show its teeth, and bite chunks out of the uncertain before they quite know what's hit them. It is certainly a hole which could well be taken as a model for any club owning a stream in a gully and considering rejigging parts of the course.

Uncluttered

What makes it great, I think, is the simplicity of its challenge, and the absolutely uncluttered way the drive lies open and passive, slightly downhill, to the long shot needed from the tee; and then the green sits perched in its eyrie, lying open in front and at the right to the rim of the gully. The only sand bunker on the hole is the little pot at the left of the fairway. Except when the wind is really strong against, all the 16th says to the player is: "Hit your drive anywhere you like down the centre or right of the fairway; then choose your club; then hit your second straight and firm, with enough height to pitch the green".

That's all. But that is one of the purest challenges in golf.