

# First time nerves

I have a dream. Well not really a dream, more your recurring nightmare actually. In this dream I have had the dubious honour of being picked to play for my club's 'A' team at a course I had not yet had the pleasure of playing.

I arrive at the venue with my teammates in good time and having donned my spikes I am pleased to hear the Captain suggest a couple of swift drinks as a kind of pre-match warming up strategy. Having found the bar I learn that I have been chosen to play first. This immediately fills me with that sickening feeling of trepidation one gets when one realises that the usual 1st tee out of control lunge is to be witnessed by a sizeable audience made up of one's peers.

Then to my horror I notice that the opposition is already climbing up onto the 1st tee. Such an action would not normally relegate a dream like this to the category of nightmare but in this case the 1st tee is the bar. Yes that's right, on the bar top, inside the clubhouse. A couple of the local members open up a window at the far end of the lounge and my opponent having mounted the top of the bar casually tees up a ball. Following a cursory glance at the seemingly impossible target he effortlessly dispatches a precision shot through the open window, through the car park, through an archway at the end of the car park and out onto the middle of the 1st fairway.

I am left totally stunned by his demonstration of complete mastery of what I always considered to be a painfully difficult game. As he then gracefully steps down from the bar I notice all the assembled masses including my team-mates turn to me in hushed expectation of a repeat performance. With a stomach churning sense of imminent and total humiliation I make my way to the so called 1st tee.

Amid disapproving leers from what now appears to be a packed clubhouse, I clumsily scramble up onto the top of the bar and skate along the polished surface leaving a series of irreparable scratches on the way with my spikes. Having made several

hopeless attempts to get the tee in the bar top I simply rest the ball on the polished surface and stand up to face the huge crowd which I now notice are rapidly losing confidence in my abilities and are running for cover.

I wait for the ball to stop rolling all over the surface of the bar and shakily place the clubhead behind the ball among the half-filled glasses and ashtrays. I then glance at the open window at the end of the lounge, the car park beyond and the distant archway with just a glimpse of the fairway beyond that. Having resolved to make some sort of an attempt at a golf swing I draw the club back only for it to immediately crash into the optics behind me.

At this point in the nightmare I wake up to find that the whisky and gin that is drenching me is in fact cold sweat.

Now from this account of what has become a regular nightmare especially during the playing season, you may conclude that I am a paranoid schizophrenic with sociopathic tendencies and I would not necessarily disagree with this diagnosis. But I suspect I am not alone in having an irrational fear of the 1st tee. In fact I could argue that such a phobia is positively endemic among your average golfer. We are not as confident as we would like to portray. Was it Adler or Jung who theorised that we all have a built in inferiority complex within us, a product of the total reliance for survival that we have on our parents during our formative years?

Personally I believe that this inherent repression is as much to do with one's name as any innate post birth defect. Take my name for instance. McDivot may at first glance appear to be a fairly innocuous tag to possess, but in the hands of your typical British classroom it becomes by some obscure schoolboy logic the basis for a lifetime of under achievement and repressed ambition.

McDivot is shortened to Div, which by coincidence just happens to be another word for a pleb. A pleb I later found out was a type of wazzock, which is a kind of contemptible low-

born such as a wally or an ilk. Armed with this dictionary of derivations, the average schoolboy can then go about slowly undermining their colleague's confidence over a prolonged period, until the recipient finally comes to accept that they have always and always will be, a wazzock. (I hope the spelling of this word is correct, as it does not appear to be listed in my spell check.)

Burdened by this deep rooted belief, is it any wonder that one finds it difficult to visualise the arrow straight power drive that we are supposed to have focused in our minds eye as the defeated hand attempts to balance a Commando on the tee peg with all the dexterity of a geriatric alcoholic.

To further backup my theory, may I suggest a brief look at the names of some of the more successful golfers that have graced our courses over the years. Arnold Palmer for instance. Surely this is a name that could only ever be shortened to a catchy Arnie by even the cruellest of schoolboys. The very thought of this name conjures up feelings of respect and friendliness. Is it any wonder that he was to possess not fans but his very own Arnie's Army?

Then there is Gary Player. With a handle like that it is hardly surprising the diminutive South African became one of the best players the world has yet known. Then there is Tiger Woods. Many may spend hours analysing the secrets of his success when the answer is right there in front of their noses. Being called Tiger all his life, of course he overflows with the confidence of the ultimate predator with the grace and agility that befits such a name. Even I could have had a few sub par masterpieces under my belt if I had spent my most impressionable years being called Tiger instead of Wazzock.

No, as far as I am aware, there has never been a superstar in the world of golf who has been called Cyril Ramsbottom or Kevin Pratt.

But what have my sad delvings into the human psyche got to do with greenkeeping I hear you say. Well the purpose of this assay of my resentful

thoughts is to try and create some awareness of the 1st tee and its location. Having explained how vast numbers of mere mortals have come to dread the thought of the 1st tee, how can we the greenkeeper, or maybe the course architect, make life that little bit more bearable for the inept hacker when he takes the long walk to what is seen as ritual embarrassment.

Now my idea of a good 1st tee is one that is found some distance from the clubhouse. A small putting green should be located 20 or 30 yards from it so as to keep waiting golfers away from the scene of potential unease. The tee should be located down a path and surrounded by trees. The 1st fairway must be totally free of any arboreal encumbrances, bunkers and water of any description and indeed anything that could in anyway, shape or form be seen as potentially hazardous. The fairway itself should be several hundred yards in width and any rough that is visible should be short and wispy. Now that is my idea of a relaxing 1st tee and as we are all aware the game of golf should be a form of relaxation.

The very worst 1st tee is where the architect has indulged in some form of warped sadism and located it right outside the clubhouse where one can sense the critical eyes of the assembled drunken multitude sneering down with a look of utter disdain.

The hole itself does not have to be exceptionally testing, as then incompetence could in some way be excused, but it does have to be in full view of the clubhouse. A classic example of this is St Andrews, where despite the fairway being one of the most generous in the world, it is overlooked by the most imposing of clubhouses and where there always appears to be a gallery of disconcerting proportions. Faced with this, even the likes of former champion Ian Baker-Finch crumbled under the pressure of it all and failed to find the golf course both left and right a few years ago in the Open. So what hope do the rest of us have.

At this point may I suggest another alternative if the total redesigning

of the 1st hole is not an option. My suggestion is that the governing bodies of this game get together and with an almighty show of sympathetic solidarity change the rules of golf to allow the optional 1st tee mulligan on all forms of competition.

As I admit this scenario is somewhat unlikely, then can I offer some advice to my fellow golfers who suffer from this cruel affliction. This advice let me assure you, is not based on any whim or hunch but is rather the product of some 30 years of experience of the game and the untiring study of many thousands of written words on the subject.

The strategy I have developed over the years is derived from a fusion of modern western know-how and that of ancient eastern Zen Buddhism.

The secret of conquering first tee nerves starts at home when you get into the car. Drive to the course slowly and deliberately while paying special attention to your breathing which should be steady and rhythmic and centred in the lower abdominal region. Chanting Buddhist mantras is optional at this point.

Arrive to the course early and change into the correct golfing attire. Green is deemed to have a calming influence so include it to some degree. Do not make the mistake of shrouding yourself from head to spiked shoe in luminous green garb as this may induce projectile vomiting among your playing partners. When you have changed, amble to the pro shop to sign in a full 30 minutes ahead of time. Having done that never and I repeat never, go to the practice range but instead and in a controlled leisurely manner, walk to the bar and partake in several large alcoholic beverages. Then having achieved a state of relaxation and inner harmony within yourself, and ensuring that your Ying and Yang are in balance, stagger

to the 1st tee. On getting there you will not be in any fit state to hit your tee shot but you won't give a monkey about the result.

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