

The Haj, Part II

Seven Men's Journey to the Birthplace of Golf



Dan Marco, Jeff Brinegar, Don Cross and John Gurke on the Swilcan Bridge at St. Andrews.

Editor's Note: "The Haj, Part I" appeared in the March issue of On Course. When last heard from, our "hajis" were bound for St. Andrews to play the Old Course with greenkeeper Eddie Adams.

The Old Course was originally a 22-hole track, 11 out and 11 back. In 1764, the Society of St. Andrews Golfers decided that some holes were too short and combined them. The reduced course of 18 holes created what became the standard round of golf throughout the world. The path through the whin bushes was so narrow that golfers played to the same holes going out and coming back, so in the 19th century, two holes were placed on each green to relieve the congestion. Today, seven double greens remain, all of which are enormous and can take upwards of an hour-and-a-half to mow. White flags still mark the outward nine and red flags denote coming back home.



Hajis Don Cross, Jeff Brinegar, Mike Mumper, John Gurke, Dan Marco, Dave Radaj and Dave Blomquist outside the birthplace of Donald Ross in Dornoch.

The history of the course, the enduring memories of 26 Open Championships contested there (and the famous chokes by golfers not normally prone to do so), the presence of townspeople walking about its grounds while play is ongoing—all factor into the state of nervous elation when the golfer stands on the first tee under the looming shadow of the Royal and Ancient Clubhouse and contemplates his drive. Once our group was announced, that nervous elation transformed (in my own experience) to outright uncontrolled shaking. It is said that when President Dwight D. Eisenhower played the Old Course, he had such a case of the jitters that he skipped the first hole and proceeded directly to no. 2. Had I known this was an option, I'd have gladly done the same, as after three shots—the first ending up directly left of the tee in the Valley of Sin adjacent to the 18th green, the second striking a Renault parked on the street a good hundred yards left of the intended target, and the third coming to rest in the Swilcan Burn—I was off to a very bad start, and my caddie was having second thoughts about his decision to wake up this day. It took a good five holes and considerable coaxing and “clubbing” from my caddie to get past that debacle, and I was able to settle down and enjoy the ride finally.

None of us made it through unscathed, as we each experienced an assortment of the 112 bunkers, the occasional four-putts and a few walks through the whins and gorse in search of our errant shots. The revetted bunkers were the deepest we had encountered—built that way to prevent the sand from blowing out—and had their own identities, with names like Hell, the Coffins, Cat's Trap and Grave. When dinner conversation shifted to maintenance practices, Eddie told us that bunkers were raked two to three times per week, prompting one of

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our more astute minds to inquire, “By hand?” No, John, we drop Sand Pros in with a crane . . .

No course on our tour more than the Old Course exemplified the importance of a good caddie to play guide through the round. Most every hazard is hidden (mainly because the course was originally played in a clockwise direction, then was reversed when Old Tom created a separate green for the first hole); every shot—although offering several different options for a successful outcome—needs the expertise of an experienced sidekick to show the way; and every putt requires both a speed and line, as the greens are sadistically tricky to read. And what a fine lot the Scottish caddies are! They are exactly as you would imagine, caricatures of the grizzled Scotsman, and poster-boys for the anti-smoking advertisements that warn not of the risk of cancer, but of the dangers of premature skin aging and tooth yellowing. Their ability to judge distance by the club needed as opposed to the yardage (especially on the Old Course and at Muirfield, where sprinkler heads are covered with green carpet to conceal them from cameras) is just one example of their talents. Another bonus is their almost uncanny ability to find golf balls in the most difficult of places, from rocky crag to thorny gorse to waist-deep rough. It is a matter of pride for a caddie to have you play the same ball all 18 holes, and if a ball seems hopelessly lost, his compadres will soon be joining him, forming a line as they wade through whatever trouble their employer has



The first hole at St. Andrews.

found to locate the ball. They are grizzled, yes, but they bring a sense of humor to the course that I imagine keeps them sane during the four hours they are forced to spend with golfers the likes of us. When one of our group hit a tee shot into an area NOT intended for tee shots to land in, and uttered, “Uh oh, what’s down there?”, the snappy reply was, “A Taytleist one, I hoop.” Myself, thinking I had just happened upon an agreeable caddie by sheer luck as he answered all of my questions with, “Oh, aye,” later realized he was in fact saying, “oh why?” (as in, oh why did I get him, oh why did he come here, and oh why is God mad at me?).

So onward we toiled, through Heathery and High, Short and End,

through the Long Hole and the Road Hole with its famous round-ruining Road Bunker, and the spectacular finish at Tom Morris: the 18th hole, home of the Swilcan Bridge and the Valley of Sin—the ancient spires of the University, the Royal and Ancient Clubhouse and a gallery of townfolk forming the dramatic backdrop. And then it was over, and off we went to the St. Andrews Golf Club (my unfortunate Renault still parked in front) as guests of Eddie, where the rounds were dissected, lies told and embalming fluids consumed by those of us who felt as if we had died. A night on the town followed, and after much debate as to the actual width of the first and 18th fairways, a late-night/early-morning pacing-off proved once and for all that Ian Baker-Finch had to hook his ball 112 yards (give or take) due left to achieve his infamous OB shot off the first tee.

Our luck with the October weather had held up reasonably well to this point, but all that would soon change. Tuesday brought rain, sleet, snow, wind and more rain on the new Kingsbarns Golf Links, just six miles down the road from the revered Old Course. The weather was so bad that even the caddies stayed home, but that didn’t stop this group. Although Kingsbarns only opened in July of 2000, the design of Americans Kyle Phillips and Mark Parsinen, golf has been played on the site since at least



St. Andrews—the Old Course and the old city.

1793, and areas of the course incorporate parts of the original layout, including a meandering burn dating from at least the 1600s and a bridge built of hewn stone 300 years ago by French POWs from the Napoleonic Wars—both features accidentally unearthed by bulldozers during the layout's construction. None of us were too excited about including this "new" course in our itinerary of historic courses, but after lugging our bags through 17 holes of steady rain and constant gale-force winds (the remaining hole providing us with a lovely face-pelting sleet), we were all converts. All 18 holes offered vistas of the North Sea (and in some cases, the North Sea offered an unfortunate resting place for our less-than-inspired shots), incredible changes in elevation, and all the subtle charms of the renowned and revered courses we had played previously. The only difference was that it was the first links course we had played that was routed such that each nine ended up at the clubhouse—a welcome sight on this day, as the time spent between nines was utilized to dry our clothes and



The thick gorse at St. Andrews.

warm our bellies. The course was fair, rewarding aggressive drive lines with contours and angles that released toward the hole, and with 17 of the 18 holes offering "ramp-up" approaches. With the exception of the par-3 15th, where the green lies precariously perched on a point of rocky

land jutting into the sea, only the spectacular 18th hole had a forced carry—over the ancient burn and historic bridge onto the final green. What made this course even more amazing was the fact that it was not built on linksland. The entire site is a

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St. Andrews' famous Hell Bunker.

man-made links, which entailed moving more than 300,000 cubic yards of sand and planting it all to native grasses (though you would not know it by playing it). It was a soggy-dog day, but the group was in unison in praising Kingsbarns as one of our favorites (or should I say favourites?).

After the tearful (it was cold and windy) farewells to Jack and Mary at the Dunvegan, we loaded into Murdo's Ark for the final leg of the tour—a stay in the historic capital city of Edinburgh (Ed-in-budda) and rounds on the West Links of North Berwick and Muirfield. Our first stop was in North Berwick on another miserable day of rain and sleet. The club, established in 1832, owes very little of its design to man, having been formed almost totally by Mother Nature. The original course was only six holes, but was lengthened to 18 in 1877, leaving the original stone boundary wall (called the March Dyke) in place and in play on several holes. Our first impression upon arriving was how the first and 18th holes resembled those at the Old Course, sharing a broad expanse of fairway bordered by a white rail fence, a public road intersecting it for access to the ocean, and—dear God—a line of cars parked perilously close to the 18th green (not to worry,



No. 12 at Kingsbarns.

though, as the green fee covers the mandatory Visiting Golfers Insurance policy). Our next impression was that we were all going to freeze our rears off. But once our caddies arrived (I think three showed up) and the round began, it was impossible not to warm up to this great course.

Every hole, beginning with Point Garry Out to Quarry to Mizzentop, from Eastward Ho! to Bos'ns Locker to Pit, from Redan on

in to Home, had something memorable and unique. Redan, the 15th hole, is the model by which all similar par 3s are based—the original “redan” hole. The name comes from the Crimean War, when the British captured a Russian-held fort, or in the local dialect, redan. The current Oxford Dictionary defines redan as “fort—a work having two faces forming a salient towards the enemy.” The Pit is another unique golf hole, where



Kingsbarns' front nine and the North Sea.

after hitting a perfectly-placed tee shot, you must play a short chip over the stone wall guarding the sunken green. The next hole, Gate, was another beauty—a par 4 where you must get your tee shot airborne quickly to avoid the wall that crosses in front of the tee, and then negotiate your second shot to a green that is elevated six feet in front and at the rear, with a gully in the middle at fairway level. One unfortunate group member's tee shot (okay—Marco's) hit the wall, caromed backward and came to rest about 100 yards behind the tee.

It's funny to think that these types of conditions and hazards—the walls, the pit bunkers, the patches of unkempt vegetation, the animal droppings, the not-so-perfect lies—would be intolerable to the golfers who play our own courses here; but in Scotland they are accepted as part of the game. To Scots, golf is not about perfection, but about making do with what you have in front of you, and by accepting the “rub of the green.” This is as much a part of their game as it is the governing philosophy of their daily lives—don't moan about your bad luck, because there is no bad luck. Just put a smile on your face, deal with it and move on. This philosophy is the main reason a game of golf in Scotland takes three-and-a-half hours to play, as opposed to the excruciating five-plus-hour rounds we have become accustomed to here.

“Onward, gentlemen!” hollered Murdo, so back into the Ark we went



No. 2 at North Berwick.

and on to Edinburgh and the Crowne Plaza Hotel. Now this hotel was nothing like the previous two “pubs” we had stayed in. Although the exterior façade indeed appeared old (like everything else in Scotland, it has to either be 800 years old, or at least appear that way), the interior was very modern, with actual drywall in the rooms, computer kiosks and phones with buttons as opposed to dials. This phenomenon led to a discussion on the level of poverty a Scottish vinyl-siding salesman must live in, as there is no vinyl siding in Scotland. Now the stone salesman, on the other hand, probably lives in a castle—everything is made of

stone, including streets, buildings, fences, even phone booths. This observation prompted the reflection, “They need some new stuff over here.” A walk about the stone streets of the city took us to the Edinburgh Castle (a stone structure just up the road), which sits precariously on a huge hill with many stones overlooking the entire city made of stone. The panoramic view of Edinburgh, with its countless stone spires, brought visions of Charles Dickens' London to mind—the entire city had the aura of being in a time warp. The trip back into history put everyone in the mood for our final day of golf—a 36-hole odyssey on the revered Muirfield Links.

The Old Tom Morris-designed Muirfield, the Links of the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers, has been situated in its present location in Gullane since it opened in 1891. However, the Company itself is the oldest golf club on record, having been founded in 1744. This group of men wrote the original Thirteen Articles (the first rules of golf), which were adopted 10 years later by the St. Andrews Society of Golfers, later to become the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews. The Company began playing golf on the Leith links outside of Edinburgh, but when it became too populated, they moved down the road to a nine-hole course beside the

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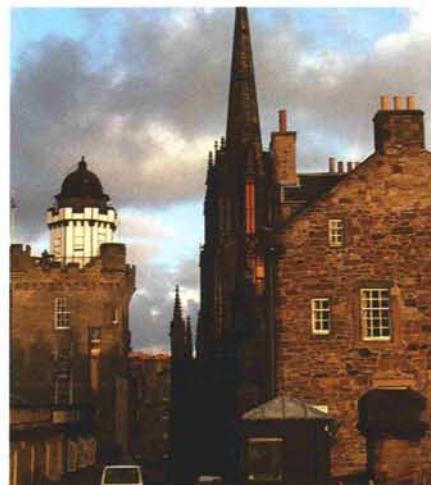
The Pit is the 13th hole at North Berwick.

race track in Musselburgh. This, too, became overcrowded eventually, and again they moved, this time for good to the site of the East Lothian horse races on the Hundred Acres Park at Muirfield. The name “muir” was the tenant farmers’ jargon for a track of unenclosed and uncultivated land often affected with marshy areas—thus the name Muirfield.

Since the move, 15 Open Championships have been contested on the links, and it was here that the first 72-hole championship format was adopted (in 1892). Muirfield was also the first links designed in two loops of nine holes, the first nine going clockwise around the perimeter, the second nine contained within the first, running counterclockwise. This design, with no three successive holes playing in the same direction, makes the winds off the Firth of Forth affect shot-making from all angles throughout the course. We found the course to be just as it is proclaimed—perhaps the fairest test of golf of all of Britain’s great and historic courses. All the dangers are visible, and its difficulty lies not in trickery, but in its length, its ball-magnet bunkers and its unyielding rough. Luckily for us, the wind was

not a factor this day, and we were treated to a beautiful sunny day with 18 holes of two-ball and 18 of alternate shot (the Muirfield tradition), with an outstanding lunch in the men’s grill room in between (where coat and tie are required attire, and the dessert station was a must-visit).

Our final night of the journey was spent back in Edinburgh, with a gourmet dinner at the Dubh Prais (complete with Haggis for the brave souls) and the warming of pub stools afterward. On this night, one of the few where all seven of us were together in one place (a pub, of course), we reflected on our experience, talked of our favorite courses and dubbed each man a particular member of Scottish royalty, based on his behavior during the trip. At this point, my notes were fairly illegible, but the names jotted down included Sir Sweats-a-lot, the Earl of Ears, the Vicar of Vulgaricity, the Count of Conservatism, the Duke of Duck Hook and the Baron of Brora, who was accorded rule over the Fiefdom of Flatulence (an area of the bus where only he would sit). Alas, all good things must come to an end, and it was off to bed before the trip to Glasgow and the flight home. As luck



Edinburgh.

would have it, while we were delayed in Heathrow the last of the Concordes flew in and we had a bird’s-eye view from our terminal of the museum-bound planes’ final flights.

The long flight home offered the chance to reflect on what we had experienced, and what the “haj” to our profession’s beginnings had meant to each of us as individuals and as golf course superintendents. I can not speak for the others, but for me this experience was, in several respects, an awakening. It was an



No. 14 at North Berwick—a little long means a lotta trouble.

inspirational look into the past, and more specifically at how the game we love has been so meticulously preserved in its primordial form for these past centuries in Scotland. It reminded me that, when I look out my office window on a nasty October morning and see a threesome battling wind and sleet, with umbrellas inverted and rainsuits slicked, maybe they are not the idiots I am thinking they are—maybe they are the purists who actually **get** it. Just maybe they are the rare birds who see golf as a challenge not only against the course, but against the elements as well. Maybe I'll join them next time. The journey was also a bittersweet reminder of what we have done with the game on our side of the world—how we have contrived to change it. Perhaps the differences between golf in Scotland and golf here can be explained by the differences in our cultures and our history—perhaps it is a classic example of an international generation gap. If this is indeed the case, then why wouldn't the game be played differently here than it is over there? Still, upon returning and looking at my golf course, with its rip-rapped pond banks, its razor-sharp bunker edges, its 2≤ rough, its mowing stripes defining every con-



Muirfield at sunset.

tour, its trees, and its overabundance of accessories and “conveniences,” I felt the longing to get back to Scotland and once again experience the game as it has been played there since its ancient beginnings. I felt the need for another haj.



About the Photos

The author wishes to thank Glyn Satterley, a renowned professional photographer of Scottish golf courses and landscapes, for allowing the use of the stunning golf course images in this article. For information on these and all of Glyn's golf and sporting photography, visit www.glynsatterley.com.



No. 13 at Muirfield.