

vp3. A Walk amongst the Scottish Links

I went on a golfs trip to Ayrshire, Scotland with three classmates from '75 USAFA. We've been rendezvousing annually for a while.

- Ayrshire—southwest Scottish coastal area. West of Glasgow.
- Links—rising ground, usually associated with the type of sand dunes in Scotland and associated with golfs course

Ayrshire Golfs—Part 1

A quick report on the golfs after the first two days in the Ayrshire region of Scotland.

After I woke up this morning and was brighter-eyed and with a hippy-hop in my step, I realized that I have been in a jet-lag-induced fugue the past two days. Hence, my thoughts on the golfs below may have been so influenced.

Western Gailes Golfs Course. A wonderful playland of rolling sand-hills covered with thick, hairy seagrass.

This golfs layout presented as a true links course. No bulldozers moving the earth. No artificial shaping, no stenciled pattern, no sameness—unique. These original links courses, from the 1800's, were set amongst the links (seaside, grass covered sand hills) and were literally a sport played as a nice walk along the coastline. A respite from a hard, physical, risky lifestyle.

The Western Gailes' fairways expertly followed the terrain and somehow ended at greens usually nestled in protected coves of links.

The layout was two holes wide with four holes running north then nine holes south along the coast and then five holes back to the clubhouse. The holes were varied but fit as one golf course.

It was such an enjoyable golfs experience amongst a plethora of poorly hit shots. And the sun was a shine with a wafting wind. This far north—56 degrees latitude compared to Chicago at 42 degrees—the sun shines wanly but long. The flowers set on homely porches and city sidewalks and adorning the parks...they love the temperate temps, near-continuous moisture, and sunshine to 930pm. They flourish in health and popping colors.

As was noted to me, I did take the opportunity during my oft visits into the gorse and grasses (i.e. not in the fairway) to pick and put wild flowers into my cap.

Prestwick Golfs Course. Not a favorite. 'Tis the birthplace of the British Open and the first ever dog-leg on a golf hole. The terrain was unexceptionally "open" save a couple of hilly fairways and some guarded greens.

I enjoyed the seaside vistas that captured the harbor of Troon in the distance and the promontory rock isles that showed offshore through the ocean haze.

I'd characterize the Prestwick layout as quirky with one or two holes that were almost weird. Playing from the amateur tees, one par 4 was 458 yards looong. I excuse the 17th hole since it is the world's longest continuously played golf hole; originating to 1855.

There were devils situated in the fairway called Scottish pot bunkers. More than once we saw our solidly schwacked balls rolling in the fairway...wait...and the land curving towards the bunkers...and I thought I could hear the startup of a huge Hoover vacuum...wait...that sucked our [golfs] balls into the bunker. Damn devils.

I had trouble understanding my caddie. So, on the tee, I let him give me instructions on what lies ahead and where to hit and why. A lot of detail by a pro. I nod earnestly. Having understood pretty much nothing, I then point—where do I hit? I look down the line of the caddie's arm as he gestures forward and I'm ready to go.

Today, the caddies were conversing back forth on the tees and on our walks between the greens...it was rapid fire, staccato joshing between men of a shared profession. Given my complete language incompetence, I asked—are y'all talking Gaelic? The kindly response—no English. My daughter reminded me that when we traveled Scotland she acted as my interpreter. Thusly, I accept my limitations. Anyway, I like pidgin sign language.

There were a variety of differently styled holes at Prestwick but for me they didn't seem to fit into an architecture of a singular golf course.

From many a tee and the fairway, we faced a blind shot. On one up-n-over the hill tee shot on a long par 3, two of us hit terrific shots. Alas, we were blind to watch the balls land oh so sweetly on the green.

The terrain between holes often was open toward the inland side and, at times, we saw foursomes on six or eight other holes.

Without caddies and their local knowledge and savvy shot counsel, we probably would have gotten lost and certainly would have shot a 150.

I did walk uphill onto one green that was surrounded by a bowl of hill-links on three sides. The green was contoured into the remaining concave space; and undulating and interesting. And the quietly protected area was so green that I was invited to sit for a while. Yes, nice.

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Ayrshire Golfs—Part 2

I've wondered why I've played so dang poorly here. It's simple. A crappy player has crappy rounds or bad streaks—and there's no golfs Imodium to take. Dreaming in anticipation that I would play great hasn't helped.

By my gonkulation, there might also be other peripheral factors:

*never played this course before. "Going to the moon for the first time" on each course

*these are damn difficult courses. Errant tea shots land in "lion-grass" which declares—no club shall pass through my blades without me grabbing the clubface and turning it. Or your golfs ball

finds the gorse—evergreen shrubs adorned with inch long pricklies

*the fairway bunkers are magnets for foreigner golfs balls; aided and abetted by terrain that slopes into those 3-5' deep pits. I've earned my spelunker novice badge since I've been in those dark holes so often. Pitch sideways is the only option = 1 stroke

*same can be said for a poor play around the greens with sharply sloping SOB run-offs = 1 stroke

*too oft the perfectly imagined shot is executed yet rolls to a shyzzzer result for various and sundry reasons

*and there are no senior tees; playing from 6200-6300 yards is harder

Finally, I've been playing with Rick, a good/very good player. He seems to manage it all much better. His standard deviation for shots keeps his score from becoming effervescent. Refreshing to watch, frustrating that such skill is unobtainium.

The past two days my partners played Troon and Dundonald. I took a walk with them posing as a golfer. I bought a shirt and tried to look the part. That failed so I picked flowers and put them in my hat. Camouflage. (See photo below).

The Troon clubhouse was a history lesson and made me feel more kindred with the game. Like humility, knowing there's something greater than myself helps me properly place my puny priorities.

Troon Golfs Course

Troon is a name that rises high in golfs, yet the course was a bit flat for me—literally too. Plenty of good holes and it runs along the sea shoreline for views now and again. Linksy for sure. The topography was grand for a 4-5 hole stretch into the dunes, but the last four holes were flat enough to see the clubhouse unobscured by double bogeys. Ok, one triple too.

It is insane to think that in the final round of the last Open played here that Henrik Stenson shot a 63, a course record to beat Mickelson and his closing 65.

OBTW, the Scottish food is amazingly good. Over the past decades chefs have invaded the UK. As a younger person visiting here, the menu items could be counted on one hand and three were variations of Sheppard's pie. Not so now. Food rocks. I guess mankind has evolved. Just not my golfs game.

Dundonald Golfs Course

Dundonald was nicey nice. Big dollars have upgraded the facilities, so it hosts the women's Scottish open at the end of the month. With the hope of other big venues. Reminded me of an American clubhouse. The layout was solid, no bad holes. Placed a few miles inland, I missed the pull and feel and smell of the seaside. My golfs outing was like a date with a very pretty girl who was pleasant enough; but I kept forgetting her name.

We play our last round today. I'm ready to say farewell to schwacking a drive down the far fairway and the collective of players and caddies on the tea go—oohhh ahhh...wait...the SOB ball has popped eyes...it sees a potbunker! The agony is a slow-motion, little damn yellow ball bebopping its bouncing way over the undulations into the pot bunker. Victory then defeat. And so, my visit goes.

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Ayrshire Golfs—Part 3

Interestingly, and with some amazement, we've had no rain in our six days here in Scotland: until heading to the airport this morning.

That begets the renown "Duel in The Sun" between Tom Watson and Jack Nicklaus at Turnberry—which was the final course we played, yesterday. In 1977, Tom and Jack were well ahead of the field and played neck-to-neck on Saturday and Sunday in front of huge crowds. And in bright sunlight Watson won by one shot.

Turnberry Golfs Course

Our play at Turnberry was the best. An extraordinary and exceptional course—no quirky holes, every tee to green showed true architectural bones. The topography adjusted from rolling links to steep dunes to quiet, calm, guarded amphitheater greens to multi-tiered greens open to the push of the wind.

It was a true links layout—no bulldozers moved soil; the course was woven into the natural lay of the land.

It was easy to envision the crowds of 1977 spread across the links: looking down on the winding, narrow fairways that followed the natural curves of the sand dunes. The sunlight would be highlighting the rolling undulations and throwing shadows around the bumps.

Scanning to the east, those spectators would see large livestock fields canted toward the course for easy viewing. In the green squares are cows wandering but boxed by the hedgerows. And a smattering of tall pines offset the smooth terrain.

Scanning to the west, those eyes would see crashing waves on a rocky coastline guarded by a brave, tall, white lighthouse. The shorelines of the other golfs courses were sedated waters lapping at sand that smoothed out 75-100 yards. Turnberry's shores sounded oceanic, and its rocks and boulders offered no seaside walks. But beautifully alluring.

The Turnberry course and its nature were unmatched.

The caddies also offered that Turnberry was the best. Another local course, Troon, will host the British Open in 2024. Turnberry has hosted four times. The ruling Royal and Ancient Society of British Golf has said Turnberry will not host again in the future. It's history, its natural beauty, its glorious golf course, its prime facilities—all renovated recently to the tune of 200+ GBP...will be spurned and the locality punished. The wrong American bought Turnberry in 2015.

You know, I thought Scottish caddies would be the best and bring burnished help to me and my golfs game...offering keen course counsel, metered insight, and golf guidance. Sadly, 'twas not so. One caddie had been to the USA for a year. Oh yes, how was it? "I learned to work hard." An intriguing comment.

Scottish caddies talk non-stop. To each other. They bunch together on the tees and travel in talking troops. One time, four sets of eyes followed an errant tea shot. None of those eyeballs belonged to a caddie. In fact, their vision to the fairway was obstructed by a dune. Fortunately, our golfs did not interrupt their group gab and grab. Ha.

I'd like to know what they talk about with each other, but they speak speed-Scottish and none of our ears could listen fast enough.

While chatting, it is evenly split whether a caddie sucks on a vape pipe or rolls his own cigarettes.

These caddie chaps are friendly and fun and well meaning. And act like TV caddies 50% of the time. But you know, it's like a lost airline pilot asking for a vector—as a pilot if you get one bad vector from the air traffic controller and you'll never trust a controller again. And so it is with caddies after—"the putting line is a cup left" but the ball breaks left.

Traveling now back to the Farm. I just walked by the baggage claim area at Glasgow airport and saw about 100 lost golf bags that never made it to their owners. I wonder how hard everyone is working.

Every hole at Turnberry is an event unto itself. Wonderfully challenging and fun. What a memory. For me, it crystallized images of "links" golfs.

My hard work on my golfs game did not pay-off in Scotland, but hard work is all I've got. And that's not a bad thing to have.

Namaste vp



