VINTAGE

ON GOLF

TIMOTHY O'GRADY

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About the Book

Weather, hazards, poor coordination, erratic biorhythms, hangovers, an unruly mind and statistical improbability – these are just a few of the obstacles to hitting a pure golf shot. Che Guevara, Alice Cooper, Dennis Hopper, and Tiger Woods have all struggled with the above to a greater or lesser degree. And, since being initiated as a child into the arcane mysteries of the game of golf, Timothy O'Grady too has carried in his mind an obsession with the sport, shrugging off its social unacceptability and embracing its history, its literature and his own private battle with the club. For O'Grady, the obsession has, at times, been all-consuming and *On Golf* is structured around a personal history – how his father played and taught him, how the game dominated his teenage years, and how father and son continued to talk manically about the game even as the older man lay fading away in the bed in which he would die. But O'Grady also discusses the rich literature of golf, from Tobias Smollett to P. G. Wodehouse, and tells us of the terrifying and glorious occasion when he got to play a round with Arnold Palmer. *On Golf* is the work of a great writer and a good golfer. Timothy O'Grady still dreams that he may one day become a truly fine player but in the meantime he has given us a book which beautifully describes his love affair with the game and goes to the root of the obsession that captivates so many.

About the Author

Timothy O’Grady was born in the USA and has lived in Ireland, London and Spain. He is the author (with Kenneth Griffith) of *Curious Journey: An Oral History of Ireland’s Unfinished Revolution*, and the novels *Motherland*, which won the David Higham award for the best first novel in 1989, and *I Could Read the Sky*, which won the Encore award for best second novel of 1997.

ON GOLF

Timothy O’Grady

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

For Edward J. O’Grady

We saw elderly citizens playing at the Old
Scots game of golf, which is a kind of gigantic
variety of billiards.

Peter Morris,
from *Peter's Letters to His Kinsfolk* (1819)

In this game you got eighteen holes
To shoot your best somehow.
Where have all my divots gone?
I'm in the back nine now.

Golf clubs are made of wood and iron,
They are not magic wands.
Balls drop in the sand trap.
Balls drop into ponds.
Balls drop into ponds . . .

I don't know about you, but I got to have me a few
When we get to that clubhouse bar.
It's my reward for this scorecard.
I'm way over par.
I'm way over par . . .

Loudon Wainwright III

I

The Shot

IT IS NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO HIT A PURE GOLF shot. Let us say that you are of similar dimensions and constitution to me. The ball, the smallest in sport save ping-pong balls and marbles, lies on some problematic surface of grass, weed or tarmacadam around six feet away from your eyes at the end of a long slender stick which you are clutching probably with a haunted uncertainty and turbulent viscera. The little ball weighs 1.62 ounces and is 5.28 inches in circumference. Let us say that the stick which you have in your hands is my nearly antique Wilson-manufactured Walter Hagen blade four iron, its face from hosel to toe measuring 2.7 inches along its base. In order to execute the shot the head of this four iron must be drawn away from the ball and travel some 270 degrees up and around your body and then return along a nearly identical path to make the strike, a distance of 47.12 feet. You will have begun this curiously ungainly action, which seems to have as many moving parts as an early piece of farm machinery, from a position of dead stillness, but by the time you strike the ball the clubhead will be travelling at just under a hundred miles per hour. In order to deliver a solid blow to the ball, the correct 0.049 square inches of the clubface must meet a theoretical point on the surface of the ball, a point which might realistically be described as comprising around a tenth of the area of the nail on your little finger. The ball will stay on the clubface for only .00045 seconds before beginning its unpredictable journey. If the correct part of the clubface meets the correct part of the ball you will make a solid impact, but this will not necessarily result in a successful

shot, for the line of the clubface must be precisely perpendicular to the proposed line of flight to the flag, which rests around 180 yards away from where you are standing. An error of two degrees in alignment will result in the ball missing its target by around twenty feet to the right or left. Missing the centre of the clubface by a quarter of an inch will reduce the distance the ball travels by seven to nine per cent, or up to 48.6 feet. Each further degree of error will deposit your ball deeper into trouble, raise your score and compound your feelings of anguish and humiliation and abject worthlessness.

You are somewhere out on a golf course as you face this shot. You will have begun your journey of eighteen holes some five miles and four hours from where you will eventually complete it. Let us say that you are on a long par four measuring 440 yards and that you have hit a good drive of 260 yards to the centre of the fairway, leaving you with this 180-yard four iron. If the fairway is forty yards wide and the rough which can reasonably be said to belong to this hole is ten yards deep to either side and if we add on another ten yards behind the green, then the total area of the hole would be around 27,000 square yards. The little hole which is your destination has a diameter of 4.25 inches. In order to make the par which you now tremulously demand of yourself you must cause the ball to traverse this vast area and find its way into the little hole in four blows. As Arnold Haultain says in his fine little book *The Mystery of Golf*, ‘A tennis-player has a whole court in which to play; a cricketer a whole field; the golfer has to put his ball into a hole of the size of a jam-pot, a quarter of a mile away.’

Depending upon where you are playing as you stand over this shot you might be facing, as I have at various times in my golfing life, sand, a pond or river, trees of tropical, Mediterranean or Nordic origin, heat, rain, snow, wind, a cliff face, ocean or mountainside, scrubland such as is normally only seen in cowboy films, a glacier, ankle-clutching

vegetation, cactus, a lava bed, wild elk, alligators, ball-stealing monkeys, bears or the screamed blasphemies of bare-torsoed, pot-bellied, knobbly-kneed, beer-can-strewing citizens who should be required to submit themselves to the tutelage of an experienced Scots links player before they are again allowed onto a golf course. If your play on this day is variable and the match is intense you might pass through a range of emotion in the course of the round such as could otherwise take you a month to experience. You might even pass through such a range of emotion on this single shot.

To help you make your way around the golf course taking the least number of strokes you are allowed fourteen different clubs, each designed to advance the ball a specific distance or, in the case of the sand wedge and putter, out of or over a specific surface. You must know the distance you hit each of these clubs depending on the surface you are hitting off and the combination of climatic, emotional and physical conditions prevailing in or around your being at the time. These variables are compounded greatly in the case of the professional, who can hit each club in fine gradations of distance and high or low or with draw or fade according to what the shot requires. The variety of shots demanded of a golfer is more multitudinous than in any other ball-striking game. In fact no golfer will ever face precisely the same shot twice.

As you play your round you will look upon these clubs, as you will look upon your own body, as your enemies or your friends according to the state of your mind, for mind is all in golf. To hit this particular 180-yard four iron or any other golf shot all the technicalities of the swing must be internalized in the muscles, the thinking process must be shut down, and the mind must apprehend the ball with an intense purity and concentration. When a professional instructs a beginner to keep his eye on the ball he is doing so not for mechanical reasons or for the purpose of orientation, but rather to direct the student towards a simple, uncluttered

yet hyper-aware state of mind. If obscure thoughts about the pronation of your wrists, where your hands are at the top of your backswing, or the rotation of your hips begin to rise into your mind like birds flushed from grass, or if you veer into the caves of doubt or fear or the sense of futility or even ridiculousness, then you must have at your disposal some mechanism that stops thought again and allows the mind simply to see. This is not easy. Temples and rented rooms all over the world are full of students of meditation striving for a similar effect. You can learn a great deal about how ugly and cacophonous can be the music of your mind by waiting for a moment of panic and disorientation on a golf course and then observing what is happening in your head. You are unlikely to have to wait long. It is like the sound of a short-wave radio as you move through the bands.

At the beginning of his very entertaining book *The Bogey Man*, the American writer George Plimpton constructs an elaborate and astonishing metaphor for this condition. He imagines his own body as he stands over a golf ball as a fourteen-storey-high structure full of chambers and passageways and measuring instruments populated by a throng of Japanese navy men – lazy and dissolute enlisted men in the limbs and joints and lower reaches, and excitable, rice-wine-drinking admirals gathered on the galleries behind the eyes. ‘In their hands,’ he writes, ‘they hold ancient and useless voice tubes into which they yell the familiar orders: “Eye on the ball! Left arm stiff! Flex the knees! . . .”’, these instructions drifting through the huge structure until they arrive in garbled form at the drunk and distracted men who in response reach up from their stupors and pull a few levers, sending the whole apparatus lurching and tipping until it finally strikes the ball, the admirals then clutching each other as they look out of their gallery windows and shout, ‘A shank! A shank! My God, we’ve hit another shank!’

Weather, hazards, lack of technique or practice, poor coordination, erratic biorhythms, hangovers, an unruly mind and statistical improbability – these are just a few of the obstacles to hitting a pure golf shot. It is no wonder that Ben Hogan, considered by many to be the finest striker of the ball in the history of golf, once said, ‘This is a game of misses. The guy who misses the best is going to win.’ In the whole of Tiger Woods’ miraculous millennial season, during which he won three consecutive major championships, he believed he hit only one shot of which he could be justifiably proud. It took place on the fourteenth hole at St Andrews during the British Open, which he won by eight shots. He had around 260 yards to the pin, a tight lie in the rough and a left to right breeze. There were pot bunkers guarding the green. He had to hit a high draw against the direction of the breeze that would carry nearly the entire distance and then land softly. The shot was blind and he had to line it up against a television crane. He used a three wood, and it worked. There are, of course, very few people on this earth capable of realistically contemplating such a shot, let alone being able to hit it. For most golfers, hitting a four iron 180 yards to within ten feet of the hole would be one of the most significant and memorable events of the week in which it happened.

The shot is the irreducible unit of golf, and though touring professionals must think of the 270 or so of them they will strike in the course of a tournament, for most golfers the single shot is what they define and redefine themselves by. A shot stands alone in the memory. It is part of the longer story of the hole and round, but it is also an end unto itself. It can be a calamitous outrage or a magnificence that seems to resonate through the years like a fine work of art. Let us move back to the moments preceding the hypothetical 180-yard four iron which began this discussion. The day is fine – bright, warm, just the smallest of sea breezes to cool and caress you. Your play as usual has been