

A Good Walk Unspoiled

A visit to the Old Course at St. Andrews confirms its place as one of sport's spiritual centers

It's a Sunday in Scotland and I find myself with a few hours to spare. I am pleasantly surprised that the sun does know where Scotland is after all, and is presenting itself. Thus, it seems to be an ideal time to visit the Old Course at St. Andrews.

Not many sports have a universally acknowledged spiritual center. Wimbledon may have that status in tennis, but you would be hard pressed to have a consensus as to the signature venue of most sports. In golf, however, there is no course as venerable or as famous as St. Andrews, and a visit there readily confirms its stature. Interestingly, no golf is played on the Old Course on Sundays. Rather, its stewards (the St. Andrews Links Trust) make it available for the public to wander around its legendary features.

I can hear the counterargument brewing: "What about Augusta?" After all, Augusta is the only golf course to host a major every year. But part of the magic of St. Andrews is that it hosts "the Open" (no one in these parts would ever call it "the British Open") just once every five years, feeding the appetite for it even more. Plus, St. Andrews represents not only the roots of golf but also the present home of golf—the rules of international golf are set by the R&A (The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews), right behind the 18th green. Perhaps only Lambeau Field in American football can similarly boast not only a deep connection to the origins of its sport but also current prominence and relevance.

The idea of allowing the great unwashed to descend upon it one day a week serves to perpetuate and enhance the St. Andrews brand, unlike the approach of Augusta, which is hermetically sealed. The Old Course is of the golf, by the golf and for the golf. So, sorry Augusta, the nod goes to St. Andrews.

The first thing I note upon arrival in the town of St. Andrews is how acces-

By Bob Latham

sible the Old Course is from the town itself. Golf courses, and particularly famous ones, are often in remote, set-off areas. In St. Andrews, you can be browsing through any one of countless golf-themed stores in the main section of town and within minutes be walking onto the Old Course.

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I stroll up the 17th fairway, perhaps the most famous hole at St. Andrews, and I get close to the Road Hole bunker when a 75-year-old woman walking her dog points to it. "There's where Nakajima needed four shots to get out of," she says, referring to the 1978 Open when Japanese golfer Tommy Nakajima fell out of contention because of his troubles in the bunker. "Same thing happened to Duval," she says, referring to David Duval's travails in 2000. Is everyone in Scotland a golf historian?

I spend some time examining the vastness of Hell Bunker on the 14th hole. I watch as countless tourists have their pictures taken on Swilcan Bridge on the 18th, most in poses suitable for a prom. I wander across the expansive land that forms the 18th and 1st fairways towards the North Sea, where I view another piece of sports history, albeit this one a dramatization: the beach where the training scenes in the movie "Chariots of Fire" were filmed.

Leaving track-and-field and film history behind, I drop into the British Golf Museum before returning to the real-life history that comes alive on the Old Course. And therein lies one of the many beauties of the Old Course: it does not give you the impression that it actively set out to

create golf history. Rather, it let golf history create itself upon its ground. I have to think that even the most hardened of professional golfers experiences a different feeling in the years when the Open is played here.

I pop into the Jigger Inn, which is certainly among the best-positioned pubs in the world: an 1850s structure that abuts the Old Course Hotel. I'm pondering the majesty of what I've just seen, as well as admiring the views of the 17th and 18th holes, when a group of 16 golf tourists from the Isle of Jersey—specifically the Royal Jersey Golf Club—walk in, having just finished a round on one of the St. Andrews courses that is open

for play on this Sunday. They quickly identify my accent and point to a member of their group, a man perhaps in his early 60s with a healthy head of white hair. "Who from your country does he remind you of?" one of them asks me. Before I can even consider the question, the answer is provided by the other 14 who start chanting: "Jerry! Jerry! Jerry!" Great. Scotland exports the game of golf; we export Jerry Springer. The U.S. trade deficit continues to grow.

As I say goodbye to the Channel Islands' version of Jerry Springer, the words of Mark Twain are in my head. Golf, he said, is "a good walk spoiled." And it would have been a special, though no doubt frustrating, experience to have walked the Old Course with clubs in hand. On this Sunday, however—not having landed in Hell Bunker, not having shanked a shot into a window of the Old Course Hotel, not having dribbled a ball into the Swilcan Burn, and not having to blast my way out of the "Sands of Nakajima," as the Road Hole bunker became known in 1978—this was a good walk unspoiled. ■

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