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Golf's Sacred Journey

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1. A FORK IN THE ROAD

How can a game have such an effect on a man's soul?

It was a scene all too familiar. I had entered this tournament with high hopes. This was going to be my breakthrough. Finally, after years of hard work and practice, my time had arrived. I entered the last round of this mini tour event within two shots of the lead. With an errant shot here, and a poor club selection there, and a three putt on the par five that I hit in two, I came to the back nine needing to make something happen. A 36 on the front left me three back with nine to go.

I began to press as I headed into the final nine. I knew better, but the adrenaline seduced my logic. Unbeknownst to me, I had just engaged the melt-down sequence.

On the tenth I pulled my shot slightly into the trees left. I pulled it because I feared the water hazard to the right. I found my ball in a small thicket of oaks. I figured I had to make a move on this nine so I decided to take a risk. After all, half the field birdied this hole on the previous day.

I saw an opening between the trees, so I tried to hit a low hook

and get home in two on this short par five. Instead, it caught a limb and kicked deeper into the trees.

I couldn't just chip out now. I would be giving two shots to the field. My playing partner stood in the fairway with an iron in his hand seeming to be irritated that I was taking so long. I made a quick decision to thread the needle one more time. If I hit the green, I would still have a chance for birdie. My swing was fine but the grass behind the ball flipped the club head slightly shut, and my shot hammered a big oak, ricocheting into an area of deep grass left of the thicket. I was still out, so I hurried to find my ball. I knew it was there. I felt a panic brewing when I couldn't quickly find the ball. The grass was well above my ankles.

My playing partner was looking back at the group pushing us from behind. He was becoming angrier by the moment, not wanting our group to be put on the clock. I motioned to him to go ahead and hit. He did, and walked off in a huff after missing the green to the left. Like I had anything to do with it. He didn't come over to help. He couldn't have cared less; it wasn't his problem. His job was to beat me.

I looked back at the tee. There were two groups waiting now. I was holding up the entire field. I could feel my heart racing, the cotton was gathering in my mouth. My time was up. I had to return to the trees and drop another ball. Hurriedly, I dropped the ball without scouting out the best scenario for my drop. It landed on bare ground and bounded a few feet, resting in front of an exposed root. From my vantage point, the ball looked as if it had rolled more than two club lengths, allowing me to drop again. But I wasn't sure.

I heard the guys behind me yelling to hurry up. I saw my partner up the fairway gesturing to a rules official. I quickly grabbed a club, a seven iron, and proceeded to punch out. I picked a large opening, and without a plan in mind, hit the shot for the narrow

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neck of the fairway. I caught it a little thin, sending the ball scurrying across the fairway. Surely it would stop. It caught a burned out area and continued to roll toward the water hazard. I was crumbling inside. Surely this must be a dream.

The official drove up and asked why I was taking so long. Before I could answer, he said that I was on the clock and it was ticking. We went to find my ball. There it was inside the hazard, slightly nestled in greenish-brown slime at the edge of the lake. I had about 175 yards to the green. I knew I could advance it, and I felt like I might be able to get it to the green. The question was where to stand. It was wet and marshy where I needed to take my stance. On any other day I would take my shoes off and get after it, but the clock was ticking and the official had no sympathy. I grabbed a six iron and went in after it. My shoes were sinking in the mud, but I felt that I had to hit this shot. I wasn't going to wimp out now. As I took the club back my right foot sank up to my ankle. My balance was off, but I couldn't stop the swing. I tried to compensate, but there was no chance for a recovery. The club hit two inches behind the ball, catching the slime and mud. I felt the pain shoot through my left wrist all the way up to my shoulder as the club came to an abrupt stop in the thick goo. The ball moved forward a couple inches slowly sinking in the slimy water.

My shoe came off as I tried to step out of the mud. There were now three groups on the tee behind me. I was so embarrassed I wanted to quit. The official said to drop a ball and hit while he graciously helped retrieve my shoe. My shirt was covered with slime, my six iron was caked with mud, my right foot was shoeless, and I was still 175 yards from the green. My caddie threw me another ball. I dropped it and took a swing almost before it had stopped rotating on the ground. My barefoot slipped causing the ball to go

low and left. It wound up in the left bunker, with a left-tucked pin. It didn't matter at that point; I was just trying to keep my sanity.

The official gave me my shoe, which was covered in dark brown muck and felt as heavy as a brick from all the water it had absorbed. I threw it to the caddy and continued to walk up the fairway with one bare foot. My playing partner had putted out for birdie and was waiting impatiently on the next tee, letting me know from his body language that I was ruining his day.

I hurriedly reached my ball in the bunker. I had a downhill lie with the green sloping away. The pin was tucked close in on the left, and a lake stared at me across the green. I was numb except for the sensation of tears building in my eyes, clouding my vision. I gave it my best shot, barely avoiding the lake. I took three putts to get home from there. I couldn't hold it in any longer. I slammed my putter into the ground, snapping it in two. The head buried deep into the earth. I screamed an obscenity and left the putter head in the ground. I was way too proud to try to dig it out in front of the gallery.

The rules official met me on the tee box and assessed me one shot for slow play and two for the tirade he just witnessed.

A couple of old college buddies saw me and ran up and asked how I was doing. They had come out to watch because they had seen that I was near the lead after day one. I yelled at them to leave me alone, not knowing they had just arrived and had not witnessed my previous hole. I was out of control. Any psychiatrist would have committed me at that moment. I had all the symptoms of a suicidal maniac. I had lost all sense of reality. In my mind I had entered a world as near to hell as you could describe.

I finished the round in what felt like a coma. I bogeyed every hole coming in. That was amazing, considering my state of mind. I didn't have a putter, and I only had one shoe on. I had no feeling.

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My head was swirling. I was dying inside. I stared at my scorecard for a long time, wondering how I could disqualify myself to avoid having to post my score. But I couldn't. My dad had taught me early in life to never quit, never ever quit. There it was for everyone to see, a 15 on the hole, 12 of my shots plus three strokes tacked on by the rules official. This on the shortest par five on the course. My final score on the back was 54, to go with my 36 on the front. A 90, the worst score in the history of this tournament. That score represented me. It was my identity. I was a failure, a choke, and soon to be the butt-end of a bunch of jokes.

I jumped in my car and left the scene of the accident. I had to leave, had to drive. I was looking for an escape. I headed west out of San Antonio on a small farm-to-market road, not having a clue where it would lead me. I just knew it would be better than here, because no one would know me there. I began to cry — a grown man! I began to yell at myself, the game, and even God for allowing such a stupid game to be invented.

Mile after mile went by. I saw nothing, noticed nothing about the beauty of the Texas Hill Country in early spring. I was angry. I was despondent. I was absorbed in self-pity. It was a pathetic state of mind.

Up ahead was a fork in the road. I had to make a choice. I was in no mood to have to make a choice. The thought of it was almost overwhelming given my state of mind. I stopped. The sign's arrow pointed right, toward the small village of Vanderpool. The other arrow pointed left, toward Utopia. I read the sign again. It did say Utopia. I was desperate for anything positive to happen. I turned left, knowing it was just the name of a town, but hoping for more. I needed help. Even if it was just a name, I projected more. I was looking for an escape. So I took the road to Utopia. At the time it felt like nothing more than a fork in the road on a drive to nowhere.

A few miles and several curves in the road led me to Utopia, a small Hill Country town situated in the middle of what is known as the Sabinal Valley. The valley was cut out over the centuries by the clear, spring-fed Sabinal River. It is encircled by the hills of the Texas Hill Country, providing a rugged, awe-inspiring setting for a community that time has left alone. The population says 373, but my guess is they had to throw in a few deer to get the number that high. The big live oaks indigenous to that part of Texas and a traditional, small-town main street defined the town. The basic mom-and-pop businesses of grocery, mercantile, and lumber set the stage. The Lost Maple Cafe was the centerpiece.

I turned into the dusty parking area for the cafe and turned off the engine. I noticed that mine was the only car; all the other vehicles were pickup trucks or jeeps. They were all caked with the dust of the caliche roads that crisscrossed the valley from ranch to ranch. I looked into the rearview mirror to check my face for signs of tears. The last thing I needed was for some ranch-hand cowboy to see that I had been crying.

When I caught my own eyes in the mirror, time stood still. I stared into those bloodshot eyes, wondering how a man with such promise could have sunk so low. I was looking into a lost soul, empty of life. I was in a sad state of mind. How could a game affect the soul of a man so deeply?

As I opened the door of the cafe, I was enveloped with smoke and the sound of country-and-western music coming from a corner jukebox. Circles of smoke rose from half-finished cigarettes in ashtrays on most of the tables. The smoke billowed through the serving window to the kitchen, where the exhaust fans were inadequate to ventilate an establishment committed to deep-fried food.

A waitress clearing a table in lightning speed motioned to me to come in and be seated. I didn't ask for the no-smoking section. I

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knew enough not to be laughed out of town. The place was packed, and every cowboy seemed to be looking at me. My Birkenstock sandals, khakis, and mud-stained golf shirt told everyone I was not from Utopia. Not wanting to draw additional attention to myself by standing and waiting for a table, I moved to the counter, where four old-fashioned spinning stools sat. Plastic tape held the stool's aging yellow vinyl in place. I could stare from here into the kitchen, keeping my back to the locals and the self-perceived inquisition at bay.

The waitress motioned to the blackboard for the specials of the day and asked if I wanted coffee. Before I could answer, she began to pour me a cup, saying that I looked like I could use it. She asked if I wanted a menu or wanted the special. I ordered the special, therefore avoiding further personal interaction or decision-making. The waitress turned toward the kitchen, shouting out my order, leaving me with my own thoughts.

I stared into my coffee cup, thinking back to how it had all begun. I was a twelve-year-old kid when Mr. Lux sold his land. It consisted of three hundred acres of hay and woodlands where he had raised cattle for years. Our Texas suburb sort of grew up around it, leaving an island of ranchland for my dog and me to hunt and explore. Because of numerous moves in my early years, I was somewhat of a loner still trying to find my niche. I enjoyed long afternoons in this undeveloped land with my dog. Although I had heard of unconditional love in church, my dog was the only one who expressed it.

Mr. Lux's property was bought by developers and turned into a low-budget golf course that our family quickly joined. My dad had introduced me to the game of golf several years before when I shagged balls for him at a field near the city park. He needed me to shag because the weeds were pretty thick out where I stood. I got fairly good at it using my baseball glove to catch them. I quickly

learned to catch them in the web and not the palm of the glove if I wanted to use my hand the next day. While I can't say I enjoyed the scorching Texas sun, shagging balls was great practice for little league baseball. And I got to spend time with Dad, besides. When he finished practice, he always let me hit a few, patiently teaching me the fundamentals of the swing.

Dad was tough but fair. He worked extremely hard to provide the basics for our family. I knew that I was well loved. He gave my brothers and me many opportunities to participate in sports and other activities. Joining the Huaco Golf Club turned out to be a turning point in my life. I spent every waking hour at this club hitting practice balls and playing golf with an intermittent dip in the pool to cool off. I became a fixture at the club, befriending the old guys who played every day. They used to argue about who would get me on their team. I loved playing with them because they always bought me a Frosty root beer at the end of the round. I thought I was in heaven. They even paid my buddies and me to break in their new leather golf shoes. The blisters were worth every cent, because for a few days we wore the coolest shoes at the club.

As my golf game got better and better, I became the talk of the club, the kid who couldn't miss. I became somebody. I thrived on this attention and practiced harder and longer than any of the other kids. I not only wanted to be great, but the best. The people at Huaco were proud of me.

My parents saved enough to take me around to some of the area's junior tournaments. I quickly became one of the best in the region. My winning became commonplace, even expected. On the days I didn't play well, I felt people were surprised, even a little disappointed, especially around the club. I hated to disappoint anyone, so I would practice until my hands would bleed. I hated failure. It seemed that everyone thought that I was more special when I suc-

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ceeded. I didn't realize it then, but I had traded unconditional love from my dog to a life of conditional acceptance based on my golf score.

The waitress slid a plate of food in front of me, along with a fork wrapped in a paper napkin. The chicken-fried steak was as tough as a boot, but the black-eyed peas, cornbread, and mashed potatoes made up for it. I was famished, and this greasy-spoon dinner was hitting the spot.

I had entered college on a golf scholarship with much anticipation. My college golf career was filled with ups and downs as I met with a new level of competition. My emotions seemed to rise and fall with my scores. If I had a good day at the course, I would be too high to sit and study. On the other hand, if I failed at the course, my mind was consumed with the mechanics of the swing. I could often be found late at night under the street lamps in the dorm parking lot practicing my swing while smacking June bugs down an imaginary fairway. Many of my phone calls home revolved around golf scores. I could sense my parents' hearts rise and fall along with my golf score. Oh, how I hated to disappoint them. They had sacrificed so much to give me the opportunity to succeed.

"Hun, do you want another cup of coffee?" My mind was a hundred miles away. I nodded. She returned with the coffee and a big piece of chocolate meringue pie that came with the special. While it looked impressive, most of it was fluff. Kind of like a girl I used to date.

My past was littered with broken relationships with girls. Golf always came between my girlfriends and me. They couldn't understand how I could be so high and low because of a game. In retrospect most of my relationships had revolved around golf. Golf was my life.

I won just enough in college to give me the confidence to turn

pro. I didn't know if I could make it at the highest level, but I did know I could make it at some level. I didn't have much money, so the old men at Huaco threw in some sponsor money, as did my parents. It wasn't much but it provided a start. There were various mini-tours to choose from to get started. My ultimate goal was to play in at least one PGA Tour event someday. I wanted to tee it up with the best in the world. Maybe I would earn a spot by four-spotting. Maybe I would receive a sponsor's exemption. Lord knows I sent enough letters to tournament sponsors.

Over the past few years I drove across much of the country playing in state opens and other mini tour events. I didn't win anything of significance, but I was improving. Putting was the one skill that I knew I needed to improve to reach my dream. I was a good putter, but to make it as a pro you had to believe you were a great putter.

Every time I was about to run out of money, I would place in a tournament, earning enough to keep me going. Every time I wanted to give up, someone would offer encouraging words and tell me to hang in there. And I would hang in there, mostly because I feared what might become of me if I couldn't play golf.

This year had been a breakthrough year. I was leading the Texas Tour in earnings, which qualified me to play in the San Antonio Open at the Alamo Golf Club, an old PGA Tour stop of days gone by. The San Antonio Open was a part of the PGA Tour's developmental tour, with the winner receiving a sponsor's exemption into the Texas Open, a PGA Tour event up the road in Austin two weeks later. I was playing well. I felt like destiny was on my side. This was to be the week that I would earn my berth into a PGA event.

I arrived at the Alamo Club full of confidence. My first big junior golf victory came here at the Texas State Junior when I was sixteen. It was also the scene of my greatest golf achievement to date. I played in the state championships here my senior year in

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high school, shooting a 65 on the final day to win by one. It still stands as the lowest round in state championship play. The media got hold of my record at the Alamo Club and were making it a big deal. The local paper featured a story about the central Texas kid returning to the course he “owned.”

I played well enough to be in contention through the first three days. I was on a high. I just knew I would make up the two shots on the last day. The front nine was shaky because of a couple of three putts. However, I still believed that I could make up the strokes on the back. My ball striking was really on. I had already written tomorrow’s sports page article myself. “The kid makes up three shots on the back nine, a repeat of his high school state championship. Where was he during the Alamo?”

And then disaster struck at the tenth. Surely that was a dream, a nightmare. No one could choke that bad. Please, God, let this be a bad dream.

“Hun, can I get you anything else? Here’s your check.” I was in a stupor as I got up and walked to the cashier to pay. It took a few minutes for the waitress to arrive. I noticed on the wall to my left an old-fashioned bulletin board. One with several yellowed business cards that were stapled there only God knows how many years ago. Next to the cards were tacked other notices. One was for a flea market down in Sabinal. Another from a rancher who needed a ranch-hand. Another sheet was advertising a deer lease.

As the waitress appeared, my eyes caught a final notice. It was a handwritten message on a plain piece of paper. My heart stopped as I read the words. “The Links of Utopia and driving range: Find Your Game.” At the bottom were directions: “Take 187 south to the Waresville turnoff. Go right and follow this for a half-mile to the cemetery. We are located next to the cemetery.”

As I paid my bill, I asked the waitress if she knew anything

about this course. She laughed and said that she didn't know much about golf, but a few of her regulars affectionately referred to it as Goat Ranch Country Club.

As I got into my car, I felt an inexplicable attraction to the Links of Utopia. How could a man who despised golf so much right now be remotely interested in taking a look at this course called a goat ranch by such undiscerning golfers? I felt as pitiful as an alcoholic who just wanted to smell the whiskey, knowing good and well things wouldn't stop with the sniffing.