

Lost Swing in Paradise

by Scott Pickard

Along the dunes shoreline of Lake Michigan and across the lake from Chicago, near the small town of Harbert, Michigan, there is a cabin in the forest along a stretch of peaceful, perfect beach I call paradise. In a few minutes I can walk from our cabin along a sandy path meandering through the woods and over a giant sand dune and down the other side to a long and steep wooden stairway that drops me onto one of the most beautiful and peaceful beaches I have ever known. I love this place!

When I come here, I'm on vacation. It's a week of slowing down the pace of life and turning down the volume of life. My wife Karen and I (and our kids when they were young) stay in a simple but comfortable cabin in the woods (no phone; no TV) several hundred feet from the dunes and only a one-minute walk to the beach and Lake Michigan.

The rhythm of each day is the same:

- Wake up and make coffee.
- Write.
- Go to the "19th tee" and hit a bucket or two.
- Come back and head to the beach to read, swim, run, walk, and collect rocks.
- Come back to the cabin for lunch, a beer (or two), and a nap.
- Go back to the beach to read, swim, and doze.
- Come back to the cabin and have a gin & tonic (or two) on the screened porch.
- Have dinner at one of our favorite places on Red Arrow Highway.

- Watch the sun go down in Lake Michigan from a bench on top of the dune.
- Play scrabble listening to jazz or classical music.
- Read.
- Go to bed.

The same rhythm repeats each day, and the next, for a week or as long as we can stay. On the last day we clean the cabin with a sigh and head back to "civilization." It's a simple and quiet rhythm that allows me to hear the natural world around me and my own thoughts. So it's not a time when I want to play a full round of golf. An hour or so on the driving range is all I want so that I can hit and reflect on each shot. It's a golf pilgrimage of sorts and I don't want to change the routine a bit.

I had a conversation with my wife and she asked me, "I bet some golfers never make it to a driving range."

And I responded, "Every golfer makes it to the driving range -- eventually," because for all golfers, they never hit the ball better so many times in a row as they do at the driving range. It's where all of us find our "lost swing," if only for an hour, and that feeling of discovery is magical in some sense. I don't know of any other sport where you can rush home and exclaim in excitement to whoever will listen (maybe the dog), that you "figured it out." And you can't wait to get out on the course and unveil your new secret to your golf buddies. But the mystery of golf is that the rhythm and groove and magic of the driving range cannot come with you to the course. But what hooks you for life is that you never give up trying, and you are always searching for the lost swing; the swing that you can take with you to every course, every hole, every shot, for the rest of your golfing life. And knowing that you might find it -- well, it's like a hunt for lost treasure.

So each morning after I've had my coffee and written a few words, I start my own hunt for lost treasure by traveling north down Red Arrow Highway a few miles to a small town called Bridgman. You pass through town and drive through corn fields and come upon Pebblewood, the 18-hole municipal course. You would expect to turn right for the course to find the driving range, but instead you turn left and start heading outside town on a two-lane blacktop with corn fields to your left and right, and just when you think you've made a wrong turn, you see something in the distance that looks like it could be the entrance to a trailer park, or a go-cart track, with the look-and-feel of an establishment on the margins of society just barely scraping by.

And then there is the sign:



In June, 2004, I returned to the 19th Tee for my annual driving range pilgrimage. The hitting area was groomed to perfection and everything was as it always was, not a soul around, the place to myself, waiting for me to tee it up and enjoy the green and groomed perfection of this secret golf

oasis.

My mind flashed back to the first time I found this place and a very old man (90 I later found out) was sitting just inside the trailer (pro shop) in his favorite chair watching Dale Earnhardt Sr. win another stockcar race; only fitting since the street sign at the corner of the grassed hitting area read "Dale Earnhardt Blvd."

I don't know how many years he had been operating this range, but clearly long enough that whatever was important in life to the old



man was hanging on the walls inside and outside the trailer. You knew where he stood.

And I also met the galut of a son behind the counter, in his sixties, six-foot-six and two hundred eighty pounds (he told me), chain-smoking, sweating, and flashing the few teeth he had left.

They were a duo, you could tell, that enjoyed the slow, simple life they had organized for themselves: renting buckets of golf balls during the day; picking up the balls as the sun went down; and then renting them again the next day starting at 10 am so they could sleep in and enjoy their breakfast, coffee, and paper. Their operation had been optimized over many years and produced a consistent cash flow that was sufficient for their basic country comforts and simple pleasures in a cozy resort town on the lake.

I liked everything about this place, and every year I would enjoy coming back and seeing them and the fact that nothing had changed. But when I came back in 2004 and greeted the son behind the counter, I felt a change.

"How ya doing," he said to me.

"Great, just great," I said. "Say, how's your dad?"

He paused and looked down and then back up at me and said, "Well, he passed away in October."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said, and could tell by the look on his face that it was a subject we could talk about.

"How old was he?" I asked, which precipitated a rambling recounting of all the details about his dad being 95, and he "shouldn't have been washing clothes in the basement because he had the flu and combined with his breathing problems, he shouldn't have been climbing the stairs back and forth," and they found him laying in the bathroom dead the next day.

"Ninety-five," I replied. "He lived a good life."

The son nodded his head and said, "And he was still bowling three times a week," and finished it off with a big laugh and smile.

"Alright then," I said the way you tell people on the phone I'll let you go now, and handed him my \$5 for a large bucket and got my 75 cents change. Then I conveniently noticed that I could get 15 tees for 75 cents, so I burned my three quarters in change and as I walked to the tee I realized the old man and his son must have discussed that merchandising strategy like a football play, the way he handed me three quarters right next to the big jar of tees. The play worked on me just the way they drew it up.



Once outside I walked to my bag which I had placed in a perfectly-groomed spot, my own private practice tee because nobody was there but me. I pulled out my wedge and swung it back and forth to loosen my muscles, my eyes closed, but all my other senses tuned-in to the peaceful sound, warm feel, and sweet smell of the breeze coming off the lake and across the dune sand, whistling through the tall pines. What a glorious feeling it was to have this day and this week of pure vacation enjoyment ahead of me.

I opened my eyes and just stood there a few minutes to enjoy the solitude, the peace, the fresh-cut grass, the yardage markers, the corn, the barn to the left shaded by the tall oak trees swaying in the hot summer breeze. I thought, I can't be doing anything better at this moment. My golf spirit soared and I knew that I would find my lost swing there in the next hour or two, or however long it took, since I was on vacation, wasn't wearing a watch, and had no place else to be.

I know the pros have driving range perfection served up to them every week like steak on a platter, with brand new white golf balls and shiny clean clubs and shoes. But for those of us that truly play for the love of the game,

that's TOO NICE, if you understand that principle. I think the pros would like this place better.

Plus, they could come out here and, at least for awhile -- until the son called his friends on the phone to tell them Tiger Woods was hitting golf balls off the grass he just mowed that morning -- be alone; just the golfer and the range and his thoughts and his swing, rediscovering the sheer joy of this secret spot along a two-lane blacktop road in the country.....

.....searching for the *lost swing in paradise*.

Epilogue

Last summer when I returned for my annual June hiatus to the Harbor County dunes, I made my pilgrimage to the 19th Tee but as I approached I could see that it was closed. But more than closed, there was grass that had overgrown everything and the place was falling



apart. It was abandoned. Like a ghost town the trailer was dark and boarded up. The son, I speculated, had died. Or maybe without his father, his passion had died to keep the driving range open. I stepped outside and stood there for a moment and let the flash memory of vacation days past create such a feeling of sadness inside of me. Oh well, it was a grand little secret place that is now gone. I got in my car, turned around and headed for the beach.

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