

The Last Amateur

TOWARD THE END of a clear winter afternoon, I reached the front porch of the Pine Crest Inn and put down my travel bag. A small orange cat got up from a final patch of sunlight and walked over to greet me.

“Hello, Marmalade,” I said, stooping to scratch her behind the ears. “Long time no see. Looks like you’ve put on some weight, old girl. That makes two of us.”

“You two must be old friends,” a woman said pleasantly.

She was sitting in a white rocking chair a few yards away, dressed for dinner and enjoying a glass of white wine. A group of other well-dressed guests sat by the outdoor bar at the far end of the hotel’s porch, laughing and talking about their day’s golf adventures.

“We are,” I confirmed, “though she probably doesn’t know me from Greg Norman’s house cat.”

Marmalade’s unique talent, I explained, was an ability to recognize anyone who loves golf and keeps returning to Pinehurst year after year, which could pretty much describe every person who arrives on the porch of the Pine Crest.

Set on a graceful curve of Dogwood Road, just off the square of one of America's most picturesque village centers, the homey Pine Crest Inn, the world's most charming and eccentric golf hostelry, has been welcoming discriminating golf travelers to Pinehurst—the self-described “home of golf in America”—for almost a hundred years. In this golf traveler's case, it has been his home away from home since he was a young boy trailing after his old man's game.

“What a nice evening it is going to be,” the woman observed, looking at the fading winter light. “Are you here for the golf tournament, too?”

This was a natural assumption for her to make. With more than forty golf clubs scattered across the region, called the Sandhills of Central North Carolina, it's a safe bet there is always some kind of golf tournament going on somewhere in either the Village of Pinehurst or its larger neighboring town, Southern Pines.

“No, ma'am. I'm just here to finish some work and say goodbye to a friend.”

She smiles and swirled the last of her wine. “I can't imagine why anyone would want to leave *this* place. My husband is ready to sell everything and move here tomorrow.”

“I know the feeling,” I said. “Unfortunately, my friend doesn't have any choice. He's dying.”

The words slipped out, perhaps because she was the first person I'd spoken more than ten words to in almost as many days. During that time, I'd been driving slowly south from my longtime home in Maine to my old Carolina stomping ground, allowing myself a little space and time to reflect on several recent upheavals in my life.

The woman in the rocker blushed with embarrassment. “Oh, I’m so *sorry*. Now I *have* gone too far. Please forgive me.”

“That’s okay,” I assured her, scratching Marmalade behind the ears. The queen of the Pine Crest was purring faintly, eyes squeezed shut. “Marmalade’s just happy to still be here. I am, too.”

TRUMAN CAPOTE ONCE observed that every son of the South eventually comes home again — if only in a box.

Perhaps fear of this fate explains why, for better or worse, during the quarter century I’d lived in northern New England, I’d returned on a fairly regular basis to my boyhood haunts of Pinehurst and Southern Pines, coming back whenever my spirits needed a lift or my ailing golf game required a jumpstart. This is where I played my first full eighteen holes of golf — as a hotheaded, club-tossing teenager — and where I eventually learned to calm down, grow up, play by the rules, and as my late father once put it, appreciate the “higher game.” The simple truth is, after laying eyes on the splendors of Pinehurst and Southern Pines, I never threw another club in anger again — at least not when my dad was anywhere in sight. And though it took me some years to realize it, I never felt more at home anyplace else.

“If it’s true a writer’s world is shaped by the experiences of childhood and adolescence,” Mississippian Willie Morris wrote after he abandoned the literary salons of Manhattan for his native Yazoo, “then returning at long last to the scenes of those experiences, remembering them anew, and living among their changing heartbeats

gives him the primary pulses and shocks he cannot afford to lose.”

Perhaps, in my case, the perpetual attraction was as simple as that: As my life changed and moved in new and unexpected directions, as my children grew up and middle age came on, there were heartbeats I simply couldn't afford to miss back here in the ancient Carolina Sandhills, a place where so many of my fondest and happiest and most uncomplicated memories lay as unchanged and welcoming as the front porch of the Pine Crest. Both my parents were devoted patrons of this funky and beloved hotel. The first night I ever spent there in 1969 was in an upstairs corner room beneath the rafters, and it was here the Barrett family, the Pine Crest's longtime owners, always stashed me when I came calling.

In this instance, duty summoned in the form of the galley proof of a forthcoming book, waiting for me at the front desk of the hotel, a comprehensive biography of golf legend Ben Hogan that was supposed to have taken two years to research and write but in fact required almost four years of diligent work.

A bittersweet happiness comes with finishing a book. Suffice it to say, keeping in mind Arnold Toynbee's famous admonition that a faithful biographer must “live” his subject's life if he hopes to capture the person's essence, I was deeply relieved to have the Hawk, perhaps the most mythic yet misunderstood sports figure in American history, safely translated to the page and easing his way out of my life—to say nothing of my wife Wendy's feelings on the subject. In many ways, “living” Ben Hogan's dark but ultimately redeeming life had turned my own inside out and, unexpectedly, drained away my

zest for playing the game. This was one of several mysteries I had come to Pinehurst to try and decipher. Was this a condition of age or circumstance, the result of too much work and too little play? Or maybe something else entirely?

I felt real pleasure in the prospect of reading over the final proof pages and officially signing off on the project, yet it was mitigated by the other solemn reason I'd circled around to Pinehurst again, which was to say goodbye to my friend, Harvie Ward.

During the early 1950s, ironically just as Hogan's star began to fade, Edward Harvie Ward rose out of the green-gold vastness of rural eastern North Carolina to become the most admired and thrilling player in the game of golf.

During the spring of 1948, cheered on by his rowdy fraternity brothers from Chapel Hill and wielding a wooden-shafted putter he'd found as a kid on a bench in the locker room of his father's nine-hole golf club in tiny Tarboro, Ward came out of nowhere to win the coveted North and South Amateur Championship at Pinehurst, making himself a star overnight. After college, while working as a stockbroker in Atlanta, Ward captured the 1952 British Amateur Championship at Prestwick, then beat out his longtime college rival Arnold Palmer and a host of other supremely talented amateur players to win the U.S. Amateur Championship in both 1955 and 1956. With his movie star good looks, witty frat boy charisma, and a playing temperament that never lost its cool, Ward became the darling of the national sports media and the toast of American golf. Wherever he went, sportswriters exhausted themselves finding superlatives to describe his playing abilities, while adoring college girls trailed dream-

ily in his wake.

No less a golf legend than Byron Nelson proclaimed Harvie to be “the next Ben Hogan,” and most observers believed the affable son of a small town pharmacist was on track to win an unprecedented third National Amateur title —until unimagined disaster struck.

Following a wave of scandals that emerged from IRS investigations into huge illegal payouts given to amateur players at amateur golf tournaments held at several prominent private clubs, Ward became the scapegoat of the darkest episode in USGA history, alleged to have been financially subsidized—essentially paid to play golf as an amateur. In a sweeping sanction that shook golf to its core, the governing body of golf in America suspended Ward’s amateur status and prevented him from going after an unprecedented third consecutive National Amateur Championship, a fall from grace that effectively ended the age of the golden amateur.

Harvie Ward disappeared quietly into a whiskey bottle and effectively stayed there for the next thirty years, bitterly drinking away the most promising game, many felt, since Bobby Jones.

One morning shortly before the 1999 U.S. Open at Pinehurst, Harvie and I met for the first time for breakfast at the Pine Crest, a meeting arranged by our mutual pal Tom Stewart. After four failed marriages and a failed attempt to jump-start a professional career, Ward had finally sobered up and returned to Pinehurst to establish himself as one of the premier teachers in the game.

“That turned out to be the smartest decision I ever made—*we* ever made,” Harvie told me emphatically in his soft Carolina drawl. “Without Joanne, see, none of

this would have ever happened. I would probably have been dead years ago.”

The next morning, I met Harvie and Joanne Ward in the cheerful lobby of the Carolina Hotel, and the three of us had coffee and a long chat about the possibility of finally telling Harvie’s amazing story in detail—the rise and fall and unlikely rebirth of the greatest player who once, briefly, ruled the game.

We agreed to get under way the moment I finished work on Hogan’s biography, which I had only recently begun researching. Coming off successful bypass surgery, Harvie assured me there was no rush, that his long-range prospects were excellent.

He said he felt like a man with a new lease on life. “You go take care of Ben,” he cheerfully put to me, offering his hand. “I’ll be waiting for you when you’re ready to get going on our little thing.”

We decided to call it “The Last Amateur.”

“YOU’LL HAVE TO EXCUSE my appearance,” Harvie said wryly as he led me back to his sunny den where some pointless end-of-the-season golf event was flickering on a large plasma TV screen. “I’ve spent all night partying with a bunch of crazy Chi Omegas and did a quick eighteen before breakfast this morning.”

Not long after that handshake at the Pinehurst Resort, a routine checkup showed spots on Harvie’s liver which turned out to be cancer. He had more surgery and for awhile seemed to be recovering nicely. But not long after my fiftieth birthday, the phone rang and it was Harvie calling from Pinehurst.

“If we’re gonna talk, old champ,” he said in his inimi-

table Harvie way, “you’d better get on down to Tobacco Road. I can just about see the clubhouse from here.”

I knew from Harvie’s physician, a young Pinehurst doctor and golf nut named Walt Morris, that he’d recently completed a last-ditch round of chemotherapy up in Chapel Hill, attempting to reverse the aggressive progress of the disease. Several new experimental therapies had been attempted. None had worked.

Harvie looked exhausted but grinned at me impishly. The Chi Omega joke was a running gag between us. “There was a day, you see, when my eyes were blue and *both* my pecker and my putter were red hot,” he added right on cue. “Now, unfortunately, in both cases, it’s the other way around.”

We both laughed. The laughter helped ease the painful awareness that, owing to my delays in the Hogan book and his rampaging cancer, we’d probably run out of time to collaborate. So we sat and talked about other things for more than an hour, carefully avoiding the topic of “The Last Amateur.”

He asked me how my son Jack’s game was progressing, and I explained that Jack, who was thirteen, exactly the age I’d been when my dad brought me down a winding road to Pinehurst, had made his middle school golf team that fall with little or no practice beforehand, testament to the value of a good learned golf swing.

“Does he love the game the way you did at his age?”

“He says he does.” I told Harvie how after I took him with me on a Hogan research trip to Fort Worth and left him for the week out at Hank Haney’s Golf Ranch in Lewisville, Jack came away with a fine golf swing and declaring he would soon be the best schoolboy golfer in the

state of Maine—maybe even go to college on a golf scholarship.

“We’ll see how it works out,” I said. “You know how kids are. He seems to have a dozen other interests at the moment.”

“Give it time. Something will light a fire under him,” Harvie said quietly, nodding. “I’d sure looked forward to getting him out to Forest Creek.”

A year or so previously, while on our way to play a round of golf with Tom Stewart and his son Bryan at the Mid South Club, Jack had briefly met Harvie on the range at Forest Creek, the outstanding new private club north of town where Harvie was teaching a host of promising young players, including the current North Carolina school boy champ. The two seemed to have good chemistry. Harvie promised to give Jack his first putting lesson the next time he came back to the Sandhills. In his prime, Harvie Ward was possibly the finest putter in the game.

I nodded and smiled. “That would have been great.”

Golf, as journalist Henry Longhurst once observed, is the Esperanto of sports—the finest game on earth for making enduring friendships and passing along something of value to others. In my case, like golfing dads and moms everywhere—like my own father before me—I simply hoped my son might develop a genuine interest in playing a marvelous old game that teaches timeless lessons while remaining new and different every time you play it.

Moreover, the chance for my son to be exposed to the wit and brilliance of one of the finest teachers, and nicest fellows, in the game was a major bonus of helping Harvie

put his story on paper. If golf brought Jack only half the pleasure and friendships it had brought both Harvie and me, this would be a father's gift for a lifetime. And for my part, I looked forward to the day I had a ready golf partner and reliable opponent to carry me into my golfing dotage, just as I had done for my dad.

After sitting and talking for an hour about his hopes to go to Merion Golf Club in Philadelphia for the fiftieth anniversary celebration of his U.S. Amateur Championship and maybe "take a spin out West to see old friends in California and putter around Cypress Point a little," meaning the famous Monterey course where Ward, Hogan, Byron Nelson, and Ken Venturi once played perhaps the most dramatic golf match ever, Harvie walked me to his front door. Joanne had warned me that his strength might suddenly give out.

Two large golf bags stood on either side of the entry. Harvie pulled a putter out of one and casually handed it to me. "Do me a favor and give this to Jack," he said quietly. "Tell him it's from ol' Harv. I wish I could have given him that putting lesson."

This act, so graceful and unexpected and fraught with avuncular tenderness, was more than a little symbolic. The putter was an ordinary Odyssey White Hot No. 2, but it looked well used and loved. I held the putter in my hands, feeling my throat constrict. When I looked back at my host, Harvie's blue eyes bored straight into my head as though reading my anxious thoughts.

"I forgot to ask how things are with you these days," he said. "Everything ever get straightened out at the magazine?"

I nodded faintly, groping to find the right words. It

didn't seem the moment to air my work troubles.

In fact, my seemingly rock-steady life had begun to unravel in ways I'd never seen coming. First my mom passed away shortly after I took her out of her home of fifty years in Greensboro and moved her eight hundred miles north to an assisted care facility on the coast of Maine. Then two of my longtime golf partners died unexpectedly, essentially dissolving my regular golf group of nearly twenty years. Not long after this, the golf publication that had been my happy professional home for nigh on twenty years got purchased by a media colossus that promptly fired its legendary editor and began systematically cleaning out the staff—putting my best friends and colleagues on the street and gutting one of the top golf magazines in the business. The new editor had invited me to stay on the masthead, but to do so felt totally disloyal and a complete betrayal of the values I believed in. I was still wrestling with what to do about this matter, though in my heart I knew my magazine days were over.

That's when Harvie called to tell me his liver cancer had returned—devastating news, the final blow to a reeling psyche. I'd been as excited as a kid at the prospect of beginning work on “The Last Amateur,” which meant spending time in my favorite place in the world, playing golf with Tom Stewart and his son, and watching Harvie Ward light the flame beneath Jack.

“Everything's fine,” I calmly lied, hoping he believed this at least half as much as I needed to myself.

Harvie cleared his throat. “Here's what I think, old champ. You ought to come back to the U.S. Open and bring Jack with you. That would do you both a world of

good.”

“If Jack wants to come, I’ll probably come,” I said.

“No,” he said a little more forcefully, as if I’d missed his point. “I’m thinking you should come back for the Open and then stick around.”

“You mean to live?”

Harvie nodded. “You know what they say, don’t you? You can take the boy out of Carolina but not the other way around. Maybe you should give some thought to coming back here the way I did.”

I smiled, but said nothing. This thought had long been lodged in the back of my brain, I confess—probably at least since I was a teenager banging around Southern Pines on a borrowed bicycle—but at this stage of my full and complicated life, I couldn’t imagine how that could ever happen.

Harvie reached over and took hold of my arm. “Let me tell you something,” he said quietly. “This place saved my life and gave me a happiness I never found anyplace else.”

“I know that,” I said respectfully. “It seems to have that effect on a lot of people.”

Harvie glanced out at his yard. It was a perfect mild winter afternoon in the home of American golf. A yard-man was raking up distinctive longleaf pine cones into a pile near the curb. A number of seconds passed. He eventually looked at me again.

“Maybe you ought to come back and find out why this place seems to cure people of their problems. That’s why old man Tufts founded the place, you know. Golf had nothing to do with it originally. There was something magical here in these old pines—nobody has ever figured

out what exactly. You'd think, as a son of the place, you'd want to come back and find out what it is."

He gave me a peculiar smile, as if he knew something I didn't.

"You know, Hogan always said this place saved his life and playing career. He called it the Pinehurst *cure*. But I guess you know that better than anyone."

I nodded again. The story was very familiar to me, though the phrase wasn't. It made perfect sense, however, given what happened to the Hawk in Pinehurst. It was nothing shy of a personal epiphany, a lifesaving transformation.

"So what next for you?" Harvie asked. He was still holding my arm.

For a moment, I wasn't sure what he meant. For me the future seemed to lay like heavy fog on an Angus fairway.

"Tom and I are going to play golf tomorrow," I explained lightly. "Then I might have lunch with some guy named David Woronoff on Monday. He says he wants to talk with me about the U.S. Open. After that, I guess, I'll head up the road to Maine."

Harvie smiled. "I know David. Nice young fellow. He owns the *Pilot* newspaper. He bought the house I lived in over in Southern Pines when I first came back to North Carolina. He probably wants to offer you a job."

I shrugged and smiled. I didn't have the heart to tell Harvie that during the long drive south, I'd decided to take a much-needed sabbatical from the world of golf writing in order to research and write a book about the competitive world of horticulture.

I thanked Harvie for his friendly advice and said good-

bye, aware that I probably would never see him again.

As I walked along Blue Road, slowly swinging the putter Harvie was sending to Jack, I vaguely wondered what kind of player my son might have become under his tutelage. In the near distance, I heard the hourly carillon serenely drifting from the bell tower of the historic Village Chapel, its steeple rising through the longleaf pines.

I knew this stately hymn, I realized, “Blessed Be the Tie That Binds,” a bittersweet anthem from my vanished boyhood. But for the life of me, having been away too long, I couldn’t recall the words.

©2009 Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill

www.algonquin.com

www.asonofthegame.com