

A Course Called Ireland: A Long Walk in Search of a Country, a Pint, and the Next Tee

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An epic Celtic sojourn in search of ancestors, nostalgia, and the world's greatest round of golf

In his thirties, married, and staring down impending fatherhood, Tom Coyne was well familiar with the last refuge of the adult male: the golfing trip. Intent on designing a golf trip to end all others, Coyne looked to Ireland, the place where his father had taught him to love the game years before. As he studied a map of the island and plotted his itinerary, it dawned on Coyne that Ireland was ringed with golf holes. The country began to look like one giant round of golf, so Coyne packed up his clubs and set off to play all of it. And since Irish golfers didn't take golf carts, neither would he. He would walk the entire way.

A Course Called Ireland is the story of a walking-averse golfer who treks his way around an entire country, spending sixteen weeks playing every seaside hole in Ireland and often battling through all four seasons in one Irish afternoon. Coyne plays everything from the top-ranked links in the world to nine-hole courses crowded with livestock. Along the way, he searches out his family's roots, discovers that a once-poor country has been transformed by an economic boom, and finds that the only thing tougher to escape than Irish sand traps are Irish pubs. By turns hilarious and poetic, A Course Called Ireland is a magnificent tour of a vibrant land and a paean to the world's greatest game.

Tom Coyne is the author of the novel A Gentleman's Game and cowriter of the screenplay for the novel's film version, which starred Dylan Baker and Gary Sinise. He is a contributor to Golf Magazine and teaches creative writing at St. Joseph's University. Disclaimer: This excerpt contains adult language and may not be suitable for all readers.

I took my first golf trip to Ireland when I was nineteen years old.

Growing up outside Philadelphia as the youngest of five, I had a vague sense of my Irish roots. I knew that my great-grandparents hailed from towns in County Mayo, that they settled in Scranton, Pennsylvania, before the turn of the century, and that none of them ever went back. I wore a green kiss me, i'm irish pin on my Catholic school uniform on March 17, and I suffered through corned beef and cabbage once a year, but that was the extent to which Ireland was celebrated in our house. The only other time I remember hearing about our heritage was when my mother would accuse my father or one of my brothers (and even myself from time to time) of being a damn Irishman. I took it as a compliment, though it never quite sounded like one.

We were Americans, Catholics, golfers, Phillies fans, shoregoers, Wiffle-ballers—even as a redhead, Irish ranked low on my list of labels. The potential of my heritage never occurred to me until I graduated high school and my father took me on a golf tour of Ireland, where we spent a week discovering the Irish countryside through a bus window and I first began to wonder—what were my great-grandparents thinking? How was Lackawanna County an upgrade from County Mayo? My family came from a postcard where everyone laughed and danced and the air smelled of turf and sea. How could they have pulled up their roots out of so much soft green and gold?

My father and I spent ten days bouncing around Ireland in that bus, from golf course to hotel and hotel to golf course, and I don't think I've ever enjoyed golf, or my father, or a

bouncing bus, for that matter, quite so much. It was the golf trip against which all others would be measured, a few days from that time when a father first starts to look and act like a buddy. Teeing up that first ball in Ballybunion, as we looked out over an ebb and flow of dunes giving way to green strips of fairway, beach grasses spinning in the breeze, a white-tipped ocean just a three-wood away, I felt an understanding for how this strange game came to be, how a contest of knocking pebbles around a field survived through the centuries. Because those first golfers were knocking pebbles around fields like these. My first round in Ballybunion left me red-cheeked and wide-eyed, sitting straight up in my chair in the clubhouse, recounting hole after hole in a way that somehow wasn't boring. Dad and I replayed all our shots, and then we were quiet for what felt like a week as he slid me my first pint of Guinness (at least the first one he knew about). And just like that original trip to Ireland, all subsequent pints haven't quite lived up to the first, the one after golf with Dad, the one Mom would have so disapproved of. In his introduction to the Ballybunion links, Tom Watson wrote, "After playing Ballybunion for the first time, a man would think that the game of golf originated here." For me, I think it kind of did.

The golf that week wasn't perfect or great or pretty-it was something we both seemed unequipped to gauge. Golf as I'd known it was a game of explanations and excuses, strategies for future improvements. Yet that didn't seem the language being spoken in places like Ballybunion and Tralee and Rosses Point, places that simply weren't looking for suggestions. Any vocabulary we might have used to rate or judge or quantify a golf vacation elsewhere-those words didn't seem to translate in Ireland. The best description seemed the simplest, the one word the Irish used for everything, and it always seemed to fit. Ireland was grand. Just grand.

Many years later, I began devising a golf trip of my own, where I would prove to my unwashed friends why golf played against the Irish Sea was the greatest and truest expression of the game. I started by printing out a map of Irish golf courses, a green island ringed with red flags, each flag denoting the next must-play links. It looked like an old man's birthday cake, green icing crowded with red candles, and I focused in on which slice my friends and I might attempt.

It wasn't easy. How could we skip golf holes deemed unskippable by golf pundits the world over? How many holes might we squeeze in before friends were extradited home by their wives, their children, their Mastercard? Should we play it safe with a sampling of old Irish standards, take a chance on an itinerary of best buys, or seek out the bevy of new arrivals? There was only one rule-Ballybunion-but one rule had many offshoots to consider, because you couldn't play Ballybunion and skip Tralee, which meant you weren't far from Lahinch, which brought you too close to Connemara to cross it off the list, and made that course in Belmullet an easy temptation, which meant Enniscrone and Rosses Point were a must. We would be close enough to Donegal that we'd have to squeeze it in, which gave us no excuse to skip Northern Ireland, or Dublin, or the whole damn thing.

As I plotted our trip, I learned that Ireland possessed some 40 percent of the true links courses in the world-for a country the size of Indiana, it seemed an absurd statistic. Loosely defined, a links is a seaside course with few, if any, trees. Wind + ocean + ball-gobbling

grasses = links. The name referred to the linksland upon which the courses were laid-land that linked the beach with arable turf. Dunes, essentially, but a complicated ecosystem with properties uniquely suited to a particular style of golf. Soil rife with shell allows links courses to drain like colanders, making for firm, fast conditions that lend themselves to a more along-the-ground style of play than the air attack of modern golf. True links are covered with beach grasses of a hardiness that can only be found in such nutrient-strapped soil, and their tumultuous topography can't be built by blueprint, only by centuries of sea-blown sand.

The golf courses we are accustomed to in America-on television or on a Saturday morning-are almost invariably parkland tracks, tree-lined layouts with tightly cropped edges, fairways defined against carefully tiered cuts of rough. Parkland golf is handsome, convenient, and often obvious, while links golf is unapologetic, unpretentious, and wonderfully unrefined-parkland is the cover girl, lovely and forgettable; linksland is the girl who doesn't bother with makeup but still turns your head, authentic and irresistible, the one you'd travel all the way to Ireland to spend a few more hours with.

The GPS-guided game we play in benign breezes over unblemished fairways allows us to take on a course with one golf shot in our bag-high and deep-knocking the ball over bunkers and over water and thusly being rewarded. Links golf, with its sea winds and lumpy fairways rolling their way into kinked putting surfaces, is not about knocking your ball over and above a golf course, but rather playing your ball through one. It's less like darts and more like, well, golf, and it can leave you lightheaded with options as you stand in a heaving fairway and consider your own definition of fair. For anyone with a golf imagination, playing a links is an all-out indulgence, and it makes one understand that golf isn't about striking the perfect seven-iron or hitting x number of greens. A good day on a links reminds you that golf is about one thing, and one thing only-stuffing your ball into the hole as quickly as you damn well can.

Golf historians trace the game's origin to ancient stick-whacks-ball pursuits in Holland, Rome, and even China, but there is no debate that seaside Scots grew golf into the game we play today, and that the first lost golf balls in Scotland went missing along the margins of authentic links courses-unsuitable for growing crops, linkslands were left to sportsmen and their pursuits, and the dunes thus became the venue for golf's original whiff. And that's why there exists such passion about links golf-we might not know exactly who invented golf, but on a true links, you get to spend an afternoon with them. By strict definition, there is not one genuine, complete links layout in the entire United States (recalling so many keep off dunes admonishments by the Jersey shore, I can imagine why), but judging from my map of Ireland, it looked like you couldn't go ten steps without tripping over one.

As I studied the courses and pondered our trajectory, the itinerary grew, transforming from a golf trip into something else. Each flag on the map pushed my imagination along to the next until I found my trip back where it began, one long round of golf with no clear beginning, no conspicuous finish line. And soon, I wasn't looking at a map of Irish golf courses on my bulletin board. I was looking at the Irish golf course. In the caddy parlance of

my youth, I was looking at the world's ultimate loop.

When you played golf in Ireland, you walked. So I would walk. I would set out with golf clubs and a good pair of shoes, invite all my golfing friends to join me, and I would play Ireland until Ireland was done. The walk to my next tee box might be a few yards in some cases, a few days in others, but in the end it might add up to the golf trip to end all golf trips, the one without compromises or detours, a round of golf that truly went around.

I had spent most of 2003 and all of 2004 chasing every golfer's dream, dedicating all my dollars and hours to the pursuit of playing professional golf. After teeing it up for 546 consecutive days under the watchful tutelage of the most accomplished instructors, mind-shrinkers, and body-shapers in golf, I became thoroughly convinced that professional bowling would have been a better dream for me. Saddled with a +1 handicap that grew impossible to play to, I had become just good enough at golf to quit it, and I probably would have if it weren't for the possibility of Ballybunion. So Ireland wasn't just a trip or a challenge, it was a mulligan for my golf career. In all those months spent trying to play with the pros, I might have never played my greatest round of golf, but what if I could still play the greatest round of golf? I would never play the Open, and the only way I was getting on Augusta was with wire snips and night-vision goggles in my bag.

But if I could play a course called Ireland, I thought, Tiger would have nothing on me.

I bought a larger map of Ireland that covered half my office wall. I filled it with pins and Post-its, and I began drawing a red line from course to course and town to town, a line that I would find myself standing upon many months later in the Irish southwest, trying to explain to a couple of teenagers how I had arrived at this particular circumstance, struggling to convey to them that not only was my life in grave jeopardy, but worse, I was late for my next tee time.

"I'm from the States, I'm here playing golf all over the country. . ."

The girl leaned across her boyfriend, eyeing me through the cracked window. "Are you the American that's walking around Ireland?"

There was hope. "That's me," I said, the warmth of a satisfied ego washing over me. I was saved. They were fans.

"Yer fuckin' mad," she said.

There hadn't been much doubt up to that point, but it was now confirmed—these two weren't golfers. When the un-golfed got word of my endeavor, they questioned my sanity. But when golfers heard about how I was spending my summer, they questioned my wife's. I was either crazy or the luckiest bastard on the planet, depending on your handicap.

I watched tires spit pebbles in my direction as their car sped down the road without me. And as I looked to my loyal friend who hadn't left my side, a dog who was eyeing me like I

was wearing an EAT ME, I'M IRISH PIN, I wasn't crazy, and I wasn't lucky. To borrow an old Irish expression, I was fucked.

Other Books

The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary: Complete Text Reproduced Micrographically: P-Z, Supplement and bibliography, Micrographic reproduction of the 13 volume Oxford English dictionary published in 1933.

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