

No Man Is An Island

On the watery,
terrifying
17th hole at
TPC Sawgrass,
one lowly
hacker gets
schooled—in
golf and life.

BY JOHN McALLEY



OUR FATHERS introduce us to the game, and we carry them with us when we play. Today, in fact, on one of the world's most magnificent golf courses—the Tournament Players Club at Sawgrass, in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida—my brother is wearing my dad's hat. And I've literally got my Uncle Hank in my pocket.

When Hank died a few years ago, his wish was to have his ashes dusted across the rolling greens and sand traps of his personal paradise—the weed-flecked public golf courses of Westchester County, New York. Blue-collar guys like my father and uncle never knew the thrill of playing the impeccably groomed country club courses that surrounded them in moneyed Westchester. Certainly, only in their dreams would they have walked a track as legendary as TPC Sawgrass. This didn't make their love of the game any less passionate. Long weekend afternoons were spent together watching golf on TV. They shared extensive golf cap collections. And in the last decade of his 90-year life, Hank seemed to start our every conversation with, "Hey, did you see what Tiger did last Sunday?!" An hour later, his eruptive enthusiasm would get the better of his eroding memory. "Hey," he'd say with fresh excitement, "did you see what Tiger did last Sunday?!"

I loved him for that.

At Hank's memorial service, his daughter handed me a small plastic bag. Inside it was a fistful of Hank's ashes. I couldn't have been giddier. "Hank," I said, cradling his remains with the tenderness he'd shown me time and again in my life, "we're going to play some golf together!"

TPC SAWGRASS, 25 miles southeast of Jacksonville, is a golfer's heaven and hell. Every hacker has a short-list of courses he or she would love to play before the clubs get relegated to a garage sale. Three celebrated des-

tinations—Pebble Beach, Augusta National, and the Old Course at St. Andrews, in Scotland—top most of those lists because of their majesty and rich histories. Sawgrass, another bucket-list favorite, seduces for an entirely different reason: It scares the spikes off of us.

When it first opened in 1980, Sawgrass' Stadium Course—with its punishingly narrow fairways, torturous contours, vast expanses of water and sand, and marble-hard greens—was a punitive nightmare. In 1982, when the annual Players Championship debuted there, the PGA's greatest players fumed. Masters winner Ben Crenshaw called it "Star Wars golf." Eight-time major champion Tom Watson moaned, "Is it against the rules to carry a bulldozer in your bag?"

Over the decades, the course has been softened—a bit. And just as it has every year since 1982, Sawgrass will, this month, once again host the Players Championship. What the pros can look forward to with more than a little angst—and what has remained unchanged from course architect Pete Dye's dastardly original design—is a hole commonly consid-



O'Hair's Heartbreak In 2007, the comfort of his father-in-law caddie could only partially ease the sting of the 24-year-old's 7 at 17.

ered the most diabolical, terrifying, and ego-shattering in all of golf—the 137-yard, par-3 17th.

"Oh, it's definitely a head hole," chuckles 84-year-old Alice Dye about the infamous Island Green, so named because it is almost entirely engulfed by water. A great amateur-golf champion and course designer in her own right, Alice is credited with the idea for the defining hole of her husband's otherworldly masterpiece. The making of the monster was serendipitous. "Pete had a hole designed for that area," Alice says, from the Dyes' home in south Florida, "but he found good sand there and wanted to spread it around the rest of the course. So he kept digging and

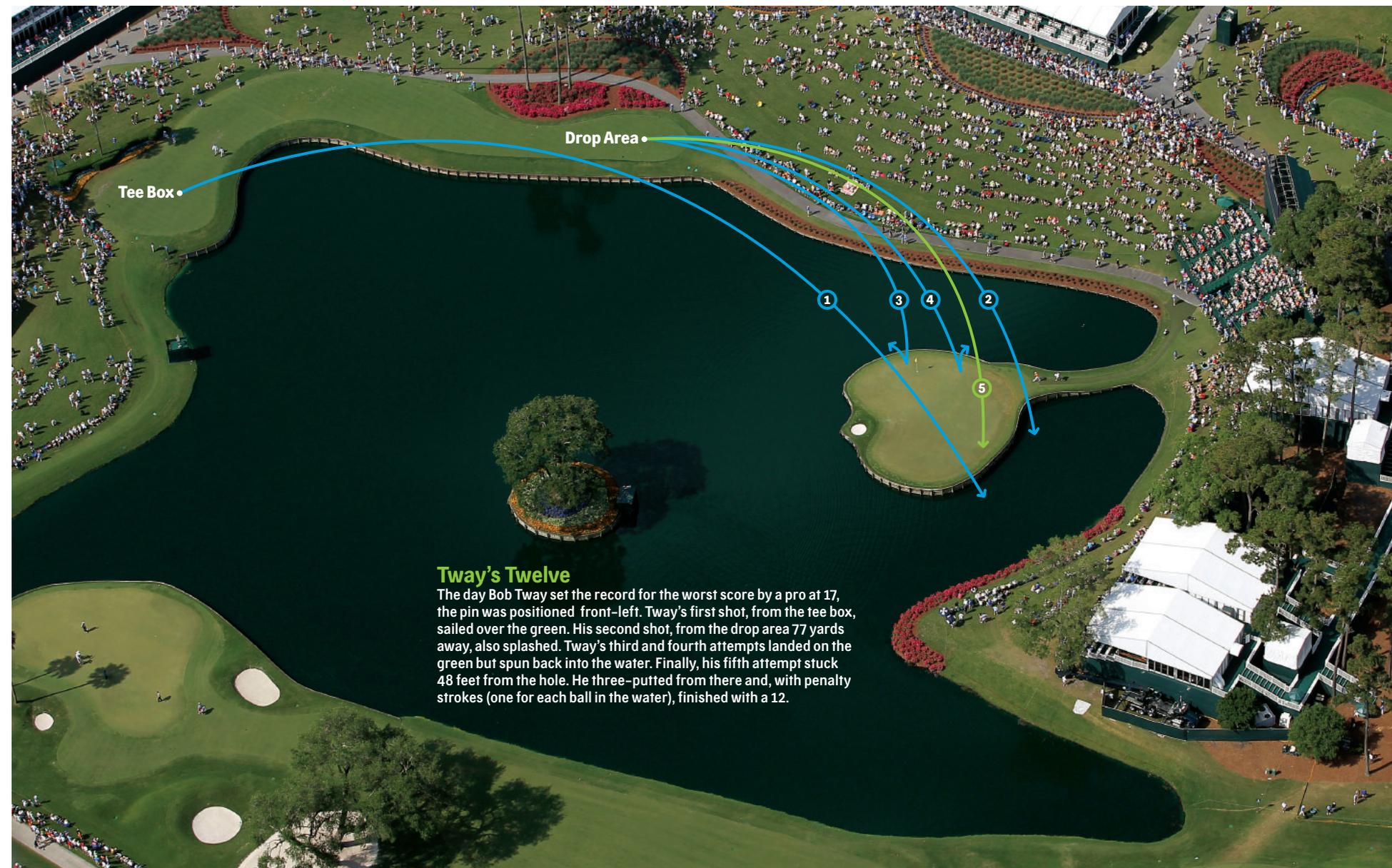
digging, and, suddenly, instead of having a place for the 17th green he had this great big hole in the ground. I told him, 'Why don't you just put a green right in the middle, throw some dirt around it, and fill the rest with water?' And that's what he did."

YOU'VE PROBABLY seen 17. It is often called the most photographed and recognizable golf hole in the world.

When NBC Sports mounts its coverage of the Players Championship each year, it uses as many as 11 cameras—an extraordinary number for one hole—to capture the drama. And the drama is electrifying.

At the 2007 Championship, with thousands of spectators ringing the hole, 143 of the sport's best players—battling 35-miles-per-hour winds from the nearby Atlantic—put 50 balls in the water in one day. In the final round of that same tournament, 24-year-old Sean O'Hair approached the 17th tee just two strokes off the lead with two holes to play. With his father-in-law caddie looking on, O'Hair airmailed his first shot over the green and into the water. His second attempt caught the green, but dribbled into the drink. He eventually scored a 7 on the par-3 hole, slipped from second to 11th place, and saw \$747,000 in prize money vanish as swiftly as his tee shots.

Bob Tway would have settled for O'Hair's unlucky 7. Two years earlier, in the third round of the Players, the 1986 PGA Championship winner was sitting in 10th place when he teed it up at the Island Green. "On a calm day, the hole is not that big a deal," Tway says. "The green is plenty big, and it's not a very long hole. But when the wind starts blowing—well, the green becomes a lot smaller." Tway put four balls in the water that day and took a 12 on the hole, still the highest score ever posted by a pro at 17. He remembers intentionally trying to neutralize the fear factor of the water by picturing the hole as nothing but lush grass from tee to green. "Obviously," he says, with a laugh



Tway's Twelve

The day Bob Tway set the record for the worst score by a pro at 17, the pin was positioned front-left. Tway's first shot, from the tee box, sailed over the green. His second shot, from the drop area 77 yards away, also splashed. Tway's third and fourth attempts landed on the green but spun back into the water. Finally, his fifth attempt stuck 48 feet from the hole. He three-putted from there and, with penalty strokes (one for each ball in the water), finished with a 12.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES FOR METLIFE/BLIMP (AERIAL)

that only the passing years have made possible, “it didn’t work.”

But no one has suffered greater heartache at 17 than Len Mattiace. The journeyman was 30 years old in 1998, and winless in all his years on the PGA tour. Yet he found himself, in the final round of the Players, only one shot behind the leader when he arrived at Pete Dye’s pitiless Cyclops. Mattiace had been playing spectacularly well that day, and in anticipation of his life-altering triumph, his wheelchair-bound mother—battling lung cancer and just three months short of her death—was rolled out green-side to witness her son’s breakthrough moment. On the cusp of greatness, Mattiace splashed his first ball in the water. His second landed in the bunker that fronts the green, but he sculled his next shot out of the sand and back into the water. Before the meltdown had ended, Mattiace’s wife Kristen wheeled her mother-in-law away. “He’s choking,” a clueless bystander whispered to her as she pushed through the crowd. “He’s my husband,” she replied, crestfallen by the quintuple-bogey 8 now commonly perceived to have dismantled Mattiace’s career.

ME, I’M JUST a small frog in this business, but I can tell you that a lot of really strange stuff goes on at that hole,” says Jim Best, the jocular scuba diver whose job it is to pull the Titleists and Nikes from the waters of Sawgrass. Best estimates that, at 17 alone, 120,000 golf balls take the plunge each year. Impossible? No, he says. The Stadium Course, which (at nearly \$400 per round) is open to all golfers in the months that surround the Players Championship, attracts “about 50,000 players per year, and each of them loses at least two balls in that hole. I’ve seen guys hit *twelve* in the water before they land on the green.”

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It’s not just scuffed dreams and Pro V1s that line the bottom of Sawgrass’ lakes. “Snapping turtles, snakes, otters—right around tournament time the gators seem to show up, too,” says Best, whose personal collection includes two of Tiger Woods’ balls that took a bath. Best’s most hilarious underwater find? An unusually large number of \$300 Scotty Cameron putters—those, he says, of the “shaft-bent-over-the-knee variety.”

In the weeks leading up to tournament time, at the specific request of NBC, Sawgrass’ director of golf course agronomy Tom Vlach heightens 17’s photogenic beauty by dyeing its water a more vibrant blue. All the better for those blimp shots and the sojourns that surprise and touch Vlach the most. “I’d say we average two funerals a year on that green,” he notes with awe. “We’ve had some famous caddies die recently, including one of the all-time greats, who lived right here in Ponte Vedra. But I’ve had people call me from New York, saying, ‘My husband always wanted to be buried out there.’ They come in, have a brief ceremony, and spread the ashes—spread ‘em on the green, spread ‘em in the water. It’s the wildest thing I’ve ever seen in my life. That’s something I wasn’t prepared for when I took this job.”

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in the throat that makes the confrontations at 17 so transfixing to watch on TV—and so entrancing a fantasy for high-handicappers like me. My god, what would staring down the watery fright of that hole *be* like?

Fear undid my father, who died at age 87, two years before we lost Uncle Hank. Despite his deep love for golf, my dad never played much of it. Unlike Hank, a hardworking family man who had no trouble embracing his entitlement to a weekly outing with his buddies, my father was too afraid, I think, to let himself enjoy life too much. “Better not to know what I’m missing,” I imagined his rationale to be. He was raising five kids on a fireman’s salary. Hank had a crew of his own. Still, he hammered out two dozen or so rounds of golf in a summer; Dad might have managed that many in his lifetime.

Three months before he passed away, my father called me to his bedside. “John,” he said, quietly. “In the basement, on the shelf next to the paint cans and drop cloths, you’ll find a couple of dozen brand-new golf balls. I want you to have them.” My father, I think, knew that allowing for the pleasure of a golf game was a struggle for me, too.

Some things we really ought to do before the chance slips away. “Fred,” I said to my older brother on the phone a few months ago, “how’d you like to go play Sawgrass with me?”

WHEN ADAM SCOTT charged to victory in the 2004 Players, he intentionally kept his back to the

water before hitting on 17. For most of the pros, the trauma of the Island Green haunts them from the first hole. “It’s like having a 3 o’clock appointment for a root canal,” PGA veteran Mark Calcavecchia once said. “You’re thinking about it all morning and you feel bad all day.”

For a player of my caliber—I’ve never posted a score better than 87; I can’t keep straight in my head a “fade” from a “slice”; I’m obsessed with the question of why balls can’t be imbedded with a GPS-friendly microchip in order to make them easier to find in the woods—the fear of 17 set in before I brushed my teeth the morning of our round in early March. Fortunately, I was distracted by a much more immediate irritant as Fred and I suited up for our 2 p.m. tee time. “You’re wearing *cargo shorts*,” he sniffed, “on one of the classiest courses in the world?”

Maneuvering around the fiendish Stadium Course wasn’t easy. After finishing the front nine, my scorecard—6/9/4/7/6/6/7/3/8—looked like the calculus for a shuttle launch, and 17 was a distant concern.

But as we approached the 14th tee, the dread of the Island Green walloped me—and just as suddenly disappeared, flushed out of my head by an utterly unexpected rush of deep feelings for my father and uncle. Could they have even fathomed being here, soaking in the epic beauty and calm of a place they’d only seen on TV? For the next half hour or so the wonder of life overwhelmed me. How did I end up here, blessed with this extraordinarily special experience? Unarguably, it had a lot to do with my dad.

“Hey Fred,” I called out to my brother as he stood over his long approach shot to the par-5 16th, “let’s play these last three holes for Dad and Uncle Hank.”



Well Above Par They loved to argue (loudly) at the Thanksgiving dinner table, but on a very deep level Dad and Hank were best buddies—and studs in stripes.

Even unearthly inspiration has its limits—I dumped my next shot into a sand trap. But we were perfectly sanguine when we finally reached 17. Fred gave me honors—an act of kindness or cruelty, I’m still not sure. The ball came off my club with an encouraging *thwack*—and splashed in the water two feet short of the green. Fred launched his tee shot high into the air, but 10 yards right of the island. *Kerplunk*.

For the sake of a good story, I’d love to report that I *Tin Cup*-ed my way to the amateur record for the worst score posted at 17, but that indignity belongs to a Pittsburgh grocer named Angelo Spagnolo, who hacked his way to a breathtaking 66 on that one hole in 1985. In truth, my next shot landed safely on the green, and a two-putt from 30 feet gave me (with one penalty stroke for going in the water) a more-than-respectable 5. I had sort

of whopped the beast (and my brother, who took a 6).

Maybe I had luck on my side. Most certainly, I had Hank in my pocket. I’d carried his ashes with me on every one of my loops in the past two years, but somehow I could never let go of him. As the sun cast its golden light over Pete Dye’s unforgiving yet enchanting Island Green, I decided that *this* place—this nexus of struggle and grace, of fear and the willingness to face it—was where Hank belonged. So we left him behind.

“This one,” I said, heading to 18 for our last brush with Sawgrass, “was for you, Uncle Hank.”

“And for you, too, Daddy-O,” said my brother, tipping his hat.

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