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Early Days



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Father's Day

My father, Milton, has never been a sports fan, certainly not by the time I was growing up in ticky-tacky suburban Queens, New York. He is a first-generation American, the son of Jewish immigrants who came over in 1905 from some hopeless field of mud in a Polish shtetl—a town called Orla. There was no sandlot baseball played there, nor a round of golf—not even to this day. Instead, there were more important things to be done, like eking out a living. The same work ethic prevailed in the New World as my grandfather opened up a dry cleaning store in Brooklyn—horse-drawn delivery and all.

My father's life has included Brooklyn Tech, the Cooper Union, and a passing interest in the Dodgers, but never to the point where he attended Ebbets Field. In what came to be the paradigm for our own relationship, it was I, in 1964, who took him to his first baseball game; a freezing but exciting Thursday night game at Shea Stadium, two days after the All-Star game, with the Mets winning 5-4 in the bottom of the ninth with a 2-out, 3-run home run by Frank Thomas. Not that I remember much, or that such details betray any significance.

Throughout high school, I caddied at various Long Island clubs—Woodmere, Inwood, Lawrence, and my favorite layout, Rockaway Hunting Club, which was my first exposure to linksland golf. Occasionally, very rarely indeed, I gathered up the courage to ask my father for a lift. This was still in the days when you had to provide your own means of transport or not go at all, and so most of the time I either bicycled the five or so miles or took the Long Island Railroad.

The best part of caddying was playing on Mondays, and I made generous use of the privilege. Once, on a sweltering hot summer evening, I persuaded my folks to come with me—by then, I could drive—and they joined me for a few holes along the inlet known as Broswere Bay, where the Rockaway Hunting Club turned magical. On the sixth fairway, I handed my father a five-iron, dropped a ball, and asked him to hit. He flailed away, made contact, walked over to the ball and hit it again. This

went on for a few minutes, and then he handed the club back to me, satisfied that he had fulfilled his paternal obligation. “Enough,” he said.

But it wasn't.



Return to Inwood

We used to drive past a beautiful-looking golf course on the way to Rockaway Beach, touring about in our '57 Studebaker, and then after that, a '63 Dodge Dart. As we passed by, I would crane my neck and look out the back window. It turned out to be Inwood Country Club.

I had never seen a piece of land as beautiful. A wrought iron fence surrounded the grounds, setting it off from a series of dilapidating single family houses. Traffic breezed by, making the stately parkland site all the more intriguing. So one summer morning, I would guess when I was nine years old, I headed off on my bicycle and an hour later found myself at its gates.

It was something out of a movie, or better yet, the cover of one of those Hardy Boy books I had at home, with me standing there, looking up at this massive stone entranceway, and deep inside the grounds was this spooky, old-fashioned clubhouse. Beneath the metal plate announcing “Inwood Country Club” was a warning about “Private: Members Only.” All of this was too inviting for me to turn back now. My sole act of deference was to get off my bike and to walk it up the private road.

Various groups of people stood around in the distance—golfers, accompanied by caddies. Dense shades of green were everywhere, all of it framed by graceful trees and some lovely shrubbery and flower beds. It all seemed in such contrast to the world I had passed through to get here. I thought it best to avoid the clubhouse because there was no way I was going to be able to explain away my visit if any member confronted me. Just as the path climbed up to the clubhouse, I veered off to the right and headed down behind the parking lot. There I found a spot behind some bushes and left my bicycle unlocked.

On one side stretched the swamps of Jamaica Bay, and across the water were the main runways of Idlewild—later John F. Kennedy—Airport. To my right was a row of hedges, and just beyond it unfolded this huge expanse of lawn and trees. We had a black and white television at home, and the only other time I remember being overwhelmed like this was when I first watched a baseball game on a neighbor's color set. It wasn't just the size of the yard here, it was also the intensity of the green color and all the shades and varieties, and the way the branches draped so lovingly over everything. I walked down by a putting surface, headed across a little stone bridge that carried me over a lily pond, and then walked along one side of a fairway back toward a group of golfers.

Way in the distance, I saw someone swing. The metal shaft glinted, the ball rose against the blue sky, and then I heard a kind of "click" sound as the ball headed right at me, except that it gently climbed, then leveled off and floated, seemingly forever. By the time the ball butterflied down to earth in front of me, I had fallen in love with the game.

More than 25 years later I returned to Inwood CC, this time with our 11-year-old daughter, Cory, in hand, to show her the spot where my fascination with golf had started. Like my father she had done a good job of playing along with my interest, at one point even taking up the game as a way of spending time with me. She could even watch it on TV with me and began to register a certain familiarity with players. So I thought it a good idea one morning while we visited my parents to conjure yet another reason for an early morning escape. She was always quick to join a conspiracy, and so we set off together in my '90 Toyota Tercel.

The ride didn't seem nearly as long this time. Strange, how age shrinks distance. The buildings along the way all looked a little smaller than they had been when I was growing up. The roads were more packed with chintzy businesses, neon signs, and the general sense of nowhere that has become typical of strip-mall culture. But then I made the right turn off Sheridan Boulevard and it all came back to me just as it had been, replete with the empty sand lot in front of the country club and the sign reminding me that I didn't belong.

This time, though, there was nothing to hide. One key to American society, I have learned, is that if you act as if you belong, people will play along. It's just a matter of knowing how to look like you're part of what's going on. This time I parked close to the clubhouse, waved a friendly greeting to the doorman, and then headed off with Cory to the pro shop, where we introduced ourselves to the resident professional. Tommy

Rough Meditations

Thomas, his name was, and I had known him tangentially from my caddie days on the PGA Tour several summers earlier. He had been one of the many journeyman golfers who tries his hand at the big life and then finds out for all sorts of reasons that he just can't quite compete or that life on the road is too demanding. In any case, I remembered him not for any success he enjoyed—on the contrary—but for his trademark use of a certain suspect golf ball: “the Molitor man,” he been called, and now, some 12 years later, he smiled when I recalled this nickname. There is no escaping a nickname on The Tour.

In brief compass, we divested ourselves of our limited supply of shared Tour memories. “Would it be okay if we headed off to the 18th hole? I want to show Cory here where I . . . well, where I first discovered golf.” “Sure,” he said, “just make sure you stay out of the way of any play. We have a few early birds; they went off the back nine and may be finishing already.”

This time, the grounds took on a meaning that had not been available to me in my youth. Inwood Country Club, after all, had been the site of two major golf championships, the 1921 PGA and the 1923 U.S. Open. That stone bridge fronting the green was copied from the famous original on the 18th hole at the Old Course at St. Andrews. I recounted this to Cory as we walked down the right side of the 18th fairway.

It was a lovely day, the air warming up, the sky clear, and none of those noisy airplanes disturbing the morning calm. And as we walked over and stood on the exact spot where so many years ago I had begun my affair with the game, I turned around and saw a historic marker that, I later found out, had only recently been placed there in the ground. “In 1923, Bobby Jones clinched the first of his four U.S. Open titles by hitting a two-iron from this spot to within six feet of the hole during a playoff with Bobby Cruickshank.”

Cory read the marker aloud without really understanding it. She did, however, understand what the moment meant to me. This 11-year-old, who usually talked for hours without coming up for air, stood quietly by my side for a few minutes while I relived all the emotions of my first visit.

Then she looked up at me, and with utter seriousness in her gray eyes, said, “Cool.”