

*This article was written for a private real estate website in Hawaii. Thus, I cannot provide the link. But I promise, I wrote it and would be happy to offer a means of verification.

The Grass Really Is Greener

E. Clark Carroll

(Psst... reader... Don't play golf. I was asked to write an article highlighting and promoting golf in the islands, but between you and me, if you haven't started, I implore you, don't. Lay on a beach. Go paddling. View lava. Snorkel. Catch a fish. Catch a wave. Catch a fire. Join a hula halau. Hike. Bike. Hell, go skydiving or hunt a boar with a knife and a trusted canine. There are literally endless things to do outside in Hawaii other than play golf. It's a wretched, miserable, masochistic endeavor and a complete waste of time.)

I love the game of golf.

I'm fascinated by its origins, stemming from a lineage of stick-and-ball games reaching as far back as the Roman era, passing through Scandinavian pastimes on ice, progressing to its official inception in the mid-15th century along the Firth of Forth on the Eastern shore of Scotland and right on up to the present day, where a Golden Tee arcade game lurks in the corner of every dive bar from Bangor to Boca Raton.

I revere its complexities, a battle against brain — “Golf is 95% mental and 35% psychological,” said Chi Chi Rodriguez — and terrain — both as natural as the tussock grass off the fairways at St. Andrews to as diabolically manufactured as a Pete Dye course along the Carolina coast dubbed “The Marquis de Sod.”

I admire its traditions, from the dress code and Elizabethan etiquette to the meticulous set of rules and its overall framework for competition within civility. To expound on those aforementioned rules, what began as the 13 Articles of Golf as drafted by The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers in 1744 has grown to — as of 2019 — a 162-page tome of interpretations and semantic threads of which the full understanding might very well necessitate a Juris Doctorate.

More than anything else, I'm as haunted as I am enchanted by its simplicity, the essence of the endeavor: swing mallet, hit ball. Is there really anything more to it? So much.

Any given round is a function of the elements, namely those of the player, equipment (see: the player), day and the course. From dense summer forests in New England to teeing off at dawn to beat the midday heat in the desert, from the altitude in the mountains skewing club selection to alligators mistaking a ball for breakfast in Florida, and from not discerning a single word your Scottish caddy utters to getting over the giddiness of actually standing upon the grounds of Pebble Beach, Bandon Dunes, Pinehurst, Royal Turnberry... there are always elements.

Here in the Hawaii, we have our own elements. There's the odd Albatross performing its ritual mating dance, or Nene poop scattered about the greens. There's behemoth waves crashing into razor sharp volcanic cliffs below, seemingly threatening to knock us right off the tee box.

There are majestic whales — who've made their annual 3,000-mile pilgrimage from Alaskan waters for the winter — gallantly leaping into the air just offshore. There are ironwood trees. (Is there a more perfectly named tree to exist on a golf course?) There's year-round sun and soft ocean breezes. Elsewhere, there's the "occasional" passing tropical sprinkle and steady trade winds playing both friend and foe. Often, there are rainbows. There's the existential gravity of being 2,000 miles from any major land mass, adrift on a verdant vessel amidst the big blue Pacific, at times seemingly on another planet altogether. And with regularity, there's the most astounding vista to behold. A tropical illusion come true. Scenes that bring with them the

feeling of having arrived, be it to some Shangri-la in the sea or just to the plot of dirt we get to call home. There are views many would pay good money just to sit and knit a scarf in front of, but we get to attempt the miraculous by sticking this eight-iron all snug up near that pin way over there. It can be as raw as it is rewarding, finding both flow and folly along the way as we traverse the spectrum from ecstasy to agony, often within the span of two shots.

History of Golf in Hawaii

The origin of golf in Hawaii dates back to 1890, when Alexander Garvie, a bookkeeper with Bishop & Company (now First Hawaiian Bank) took on John C. Cook, a cashier at Theo H. Davies & Co. in a pastureland behind Punahou School in Oahu's Manoa Valley. They used clubs borrowed from Archibald Cleghorn, a Scot from Edinburgh and father of Princess Kaiulani. History tells that Garvie won.

Established by Samuel Mills Damon in 1898, the year of Annexation of the Hawaiian Islands by the United States, Moanalua Golf Club was the first course built in the islands. Originally the full 18, several years later it was reduced to just nine holes, as it remains today. While some contend it was the first private course west of the Rockies, or even the Mississippi, we'll settle for first on Hawaiian soil.

By 1930, there were 20 courses on the four principal Hawaiian islands, with seven on the Big Island, four on Maui, seven on Oahu, and two on Kauai. Fun Fact: At the Kilauea Golf Course on the Big Island, there was a 19th hole where players would drive a ball into the mouth of Halemaumau Crater, thereby claiming "the world's grandest hole in one." Now we just find celebration or solace in a bottle at the 19th hole. Seems anticlimactic.

Over the next near-century, golf in the islands has enjoyed a steady and, at times thriving, rise in popularity. With 1965 marking the first PGA tournament and nearly 30 courses total, by the mid 90s there were 60 courses and today over 80 courses call Hawaii home.

The Five Stages of Golf: A Personal Account

I first swung a club around the age of 5. My best round of 79 came at age 15. I vividly remember standing over the ball on the elevated 18th tee at The Apawamis Club in New York, acutely aware that a par would result in my first sub-80 round. It's a blind tee shot. A slice flirts with multi-million dollar homes that sit a chip shot from the course. A hook puts you on the 1st fairway — which also serves as the driving range — where every John and Jane sorting out their swing must stop and witness your walk of shame as you wade through a sea of yellow range balls. Needless to say, a straight ball flight is optimal.

I remember the ethereal feeling in the air on that August evening. A half-hour prior, after teeing off on the 16th and trudging up the short fairway, I recall hoping to hope that I'd finish this magical round before dusk gave way to dark. That was also the point at which I already sensed

something being stripped from my unfolding feat, due to the fact that I was playing as a one-armed man. What I don't remember, standing there on the 18th, is worrying about whether I'd make par. The level of calm confidence and flow that I felt, it was the zenith moment of my golfing career and a feeling, a state of being, that continually eludes me to this day. Like that first wave, first love or first high, I've been chasing it ever since.

Two and half sobering decades have passed and I've yet to crack 80 again. I'm seriously considering seeking the help of a sports psychologist to address the utter panic I feel when I stand over the ball with anything lower than a pitching wedge in my hand.

Lucky for me, I found a way to stay involved with the game without the misery of having to execute shots. A loophole, if you will, much pun intended. I was a caddy, a job that should at the very least earn one some credits toward a degree in psychology.

Caddying is the perfect means of engaging with the obsessive pursuit of golf in a passive yet equally — or often more — rewarding form. As a teenager in New York, I kept my mouth shut, tried to read a putt or two and observed a certain cultural uniformity I'd spend many years thereafter trying to unlearn. In college, I entertained tourists with my burgeoning banter and fought equatorial heat in the summer as I trudged with bags on my shoulders through the dunes of The Ocean Course at Kiawah. Growing up playing hockey in New York, I was a diehard Rangers fan and vividly recall when they broke the 50-year curse and won the Stanley Cup on June 14, 1994 — all on the shoulders of the bald gladiator known as Mark Messier. A decade later at Kiawah, I greeted my players on the range only to shake the hand of and spend the next four hours with that very same childhood hero. Golf really does give back. On the 2nd hole, The Messiah asked me if I knew the difference between a great golfer and a pro. Quoting Mickelson, he answered with, "A great golfer can put spin on the ball. A pro can decide exactly how much."

At 35, I found myself back in the caddy shack at the illustrious and elite Bel Air Country Club, having been cast in the real life role of budding screenwriter with pregnant wife earning scratch by toting designer bags for billionaires and learning new levels of subservience, all while trying to crack the riddle of how I could parlay that laborious job in a lavish setting into a mediocre job that didn't involve wearing a onesie. A few good tales did come from that stint, though. True story, famed billionaire Howard Hughes once landed a plane on the eighth fairway to impress a young Katharine Hepburn, who was mid-lesson. Another true story, I was the designated cart driver for inebriated players on numerous occasions. Yet another true story, after Al Michaels spanked the best three-wood he'd hit in a decade, I couldn't resist but to inquire, "Do you believe in miracles?"

Caddying affords one the chance to see the game objectively, however much French existential philosophers deny the notion of an objective reality altogether. As with all sports, to view it is to see its execution and, more often than not, only its results. From the standpoint of the athlete, it's a one-dimensional perspective of a multi-faceted pursuit that both affords us all at home the chance to be our most self-righteous couch critics while at the same time paying their bills. How could D.J. three-putt at Chambers Bay? How could Greg the "Great White Shark" Norman be on the underside of a whopping 10-stroke swing at the '96 Masters? How could Phil choke so heinously at Winged Foot? This may be a stretch, but I reckon it's to finger through Ulysses, To Kill a Mockingbird, or Who's Your Caddy as if you're reading the first draft, that was written over a long weekend. But to caddy, this is to be the red pen, or the keyboard, perhaps just the favorite coffee mug that reads "Write on" or, depending who's mug, "Don't End It... All...Yet." When caddying, one sees firsthand that — not to get too out there — golf shots themselves are the manifestation of the players state of being and everything that informs it. Whereby surfing, hockey, and all other active sports require kinetic focus and thereby can benefit from a more dynamic form of flow, golf literally necessitates something

from nothing on every... single... shot. To play is to create, or destroy. Every tee box is a blank canvas. It's yours for the making. Are you going to dab a bit of paint or will you unsheathe a bowie knife and cut that thing to shreds?

Speaking of violent destruction, I recently played. My first round in five months, it was at the Makai Course here on Kauai, a track that holds my dearest of affections. It boasts dazzling oceanfront holes, dives into jungle-laden valleys, all while working its way through the pristine and equally manicured and movie-set-like neighborhood of Princeville.

With a double espresso after breakfast and Covid protocols allowing only 7 minutes to hit balls, I'd yet to find my zen state as I approached the first tee. Much to my surprise, it appeared my body was a few steps ahead of my brain, because I parred the 1st hole.

A bogey on the 2nd involved some scrambling.

With the tee box about five stories above the green and a clearing in the trees behind it revealing perfect Hanalei Bay waves peeling in the backdrop, the 3rd hole is the apéritif

for the aesthetic feast that is the remainder of this course. So welcoming is the shot, so helpful is gravity, one might be tempted just to throw the ball down onto the green.

I swung a pitching wedge with strong confidence and wound up on the dance floor, twenty feet below the pin. After my two playing partners missed their respective birdie putts, I bopped my ball up the mild slope and watched it navigate a slalom course of fresh Nene goose droppings along the way before it fell into the cup. Birdie birdie fancy flirty!

But even a broken clock is right twice a day.

Walking off the 3rd green, feeling all accomplished and such, there was a fleeting thought:

Maybe I can still play this game?

Stage 1: Denial.

In truth, my denial sets in long before the round begins. Upon accepting the invitation to play three days prior, with two fellas I'd recently met, one of whom is a smooth four handicap, my subconscious was already the battlefield for the war between delusions of grandeur ("Maybe I'll break 90!") and the somber reality of my modern day game ("Foooooore!").

Approaching the 4th tee, my cerebral organ and all of its deficits officially arrived to the party. All brains produce thought, but on the golf course mine tends toward an abundant and panic-laden amount. If only the messaging came through as something encouraging like, "You will stripe this little white pellet down the middle of that lush green fairway, you big stud." Perhaps even a melodic mantra-like ditty, "Body knows flow, little ball here we go." Send a lurching set wave my way and without a thought beyond "Arms, move!" I can likely position myself for a critical drop and garner at least a low to mid-range score in the eyes of the World Surf League judging panel. Give me a pair of skates and a stick and I'll hit the crossbar with a slap shot from the slot in four tries. But give me two or three Mississippis to ponder the ramifications of not properly extending in my back swing, my hands moving faster than my club head or under-pronating upon contact to counter my natural slice and you'd think I was actually trapped in some LSD-induced analysis paralysis. No, the form my pre-shot thoughts take can best be described by Freud's notion of projizierende tragödie... projecting tragedy. I simply cannot help myself. My real-time thoughts standing over that particular ball on that particular day were as follows: "If I break a window in that mushroom-looking villa and hit a napping toddler in the

temple, I'll no doubt be sued. What type of insurance covers accidental injuries? Renters? We have that! But does it, really?!?"

Mid-swing, the form my denial took was its most taut, that of the moment right before it breaks.

Triple on the 4th. Bogey on the 5th. Triple on the 6th.

Stage 2: Bargaining.

Over the next three holes, my efforts to wheel and deal my way out of this debacle with whatever golf gods were on duty that day is best exemplified by me cycling through various tips heard throughout the years in a desperate attempt to magically find the one that can bind this unraveling round back together. Hit a cut off the tee shot. Swing faster. Swing slower. Let the hips lead those hands. Loosen those hands. Keep that head still. Keep that body still. Do both, at the same time. Envision the shot. Empty the mind. Scoop the ball. Send the ball. Strike the ball. BE THE BALL!

My bargaining phase is a turbulent time during any round. Given the amount of holes remaining in this one, it was excruciating.

Standing upon the tee box of Makai's signature par-3 7th, one can feel as if they're almost hovering over the ocean. Though it sits one hundred feet above sea level, the day's rising XL winter swell detonating into the rocks below gave me the sense I may catch salty spray in my backswing. A solid 15-20 mph trade wind was taunting me from my backside, ensuring that with any hint of a slice on my part it would gladly usher my shot in the direction of Japan. On top of that, I was under-clubbed and I knew it. In lieu of walking back to the cart for more iron, I went with my tried-and-true tactic: swing harder.

Upon contact, it was as if someone pulled a switcheroo with a whiffle ball. Dites bonjour à la mer. But, to my amazement, my little dimpled friend kept sailing and by the grace of some higher power via a more northerly gust of those aforementioned trades the ball nestled itself between a few blades of grass about two feet from demise on the other side of that violent abyss.

I was ecstatic. I was back. That's the magic sauce, baby! Let's do this thing! If I hadn't already aggravated my aging rotator cuff on the range, I may have thrown a Tiger fist pump.

Already projecting how right and just the world would feel when I chipped my next shot in for a second of many birdies to come this day, I ventured over to the green. On my way, I passed an Albatross and we shared a look, mutually acknowledging that while even a life well-lived inevitably falls under despair from the simple weight of existence itself, moments of redemption like this may make it all worth it in the end.

However, I flubbed my chip shot and two-putted from six feet for a bogey. If they were given a theatrical release, the MPAA would have given the next two holes a hard R rating and I heavily considered quitting at the turn. I may have, but these were my new pals from L.A. and I was essentially the guest in their regular game. I couldn't be that much a stinker.

I splayed my drive on the 10th, invented a new four-letter word and immediately regretted carrying on with this masochistic charade. My provisional — as if it were an instant replay — repeated precisely the same ball flight into precisely the same tree. I considered hurting myself, violently.

Stage 3: Anger

My anger phase usually involves a momentary rebound of sorts, probably because for a brief period the rage neutralizes the neuroses. Thus, I managed to par the 11th.

At this point, we caught up to the sage foursome in front of us and the lawyer in our group passive-aggressively pressed them to let us play through. By this, I mean in very non-aloha fashion he parked his cart an annoying thirty yards from them hitting their putts on the eleventh green and, ya know, made his case. As we passed their begrudging faces before the 12th tee, I realized the most brooding of all belonged to one Neal Norman. (Nice to meet you, Neal!)

Nervous to perform and justify our request to play through, I swung absurdly hard and if there wasn't a football field buffer to the right would have broken a window - be it car or condo.

Do not ask about the 13th.

With an eight-wave set capping along outer reefs below and my rage hitting a crescendo, I spanked a vengeful 3-rescue club 270 yards to just off the front left edge of the green on the par-4 14th. A chip and two putts netted another par.

Rad.

With any hope for salvation disappearing with my snap-hook off the 15th tee, I entered a state of complete apathy for all that had been as I awaited the release from what would soon be no longer.

Stage 4: Depression.

To bring the end nearer, I basically played golf cart polo for the next three holes. My hitting bottom moment was when robots in the sky mechanically punished me and dismantled my cart to a limp 2 mph max speed after I drove it next to the green on the 16th. My playing partners watched in pity for what felt like five minutes as I pattered along in my drive of shame back to legal terrain.

On the 18th, I put my tee shot in the lake. I dropped a ball at the point of entry and put that one in the drink as well. Unwilling to reenter my home and look at my loving family with such defeat in my eyes, I threw a ball down somewhere in the fairway and plunked a nine-iron into the back bunker to "finish out the round." The shot had great contact, but I was over-clubbed.

As I approached the green, a calming sense of relief washed over me. This was it. The end. I could cease fighting. I could finally surrender.

Stage 5: Acceptance.

With a downhill exit and no runaway truck ramps between me and a third entry into the wet stuff, I harnessed all the touch I could muster and scooped my little friend out and to a stunning standstill a couple of feet from the hole. I sank my putt and walked off the course with a sandy.

As I honored the formalities of hand shakes and exchanging self-deprecating pleasantries about the round with my compadres, I focused on my successes. While my scorecard for the round resembled what could have very well been any 18-digit string of numbers long after the decimal point in pi, my parting memories were that sandy, those tee shots on the 7th and 14th, that birdie on the 3rd. Though 80 odd soldiers just mauled me on the battlefield, I still stood

victorious over a handful of them, and that was my takeaway. I believe this is referred to as “euphoric recall.” If you’re to start playing golf, I recommend you embrace this mode of thought.

Though they don’t follow the standard order as revealed by the late Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, those are my five stages of grief... err, golf.

I mounted my bike and began to pedal back home. As I passed the very same holes I’d just fallen victim to, I felt grateful for the time I got to spend along this well-crafted course. Perhaps it was the golf gods beckoning me back, but for some illogical and inexplicable reason, I thought: I should do this again soon.

Stage 1: Denial.

I truly love the game of golf. I just don’t always like playing it.

Epilogue

For some, a round of golf is relative to par. How close can we come to that ideal? To perfection itself? How deep and devout can we commit ourselves to this discipline? How well can we whack that ball with that mallet? This pursuit can be as pleasurable as it is maddening.

But for most, a round of golf is relative to time. Time is a subjective thing. We shape our own experience of it. Much like island living, golf slows time down. It stretches it out on a shot-by-shot basis and by the end a round can be felt as much as a singular feat — or folly — as it can a mass of memories, a challenge of one’s own mental fortitude, a tapestry of glory and agony, nature, whales, geese poop, dancing birds, sun, rain, more rain, rainbows, laughs, profanity, stories, rivalry, friendship, and connection, all rich in quality, all lingering thereafter with a subtle sense of gratitude for us being present and focused, aware of our surroundings, the smell of the air, the sound of the waves, our feet firmly planted on this fruitful ground, with friends both new and old along the way. And hopefully, with our phones left in the car.

On any given Aloha Friday, golf in Hawaii can take many forms. It can be grinding and grueling or casual and cruisy. Whether we’re in our new G/Fores behind the unmarked gates of what seems to be some secret society or we’re barefooted in board shorts with our bros, we all exist in the same island bubble, psychologically protected by that large moat called the Pacific Ocean. I venture to assert that more than anywhere else on this wondrous Earth, golfing in Hawaii is more diverse and offers one the opportunity to truly shape their own experience, 365 tropical days a year. And you don’t need a passport to come.

In Hawaii, we’re not beholden to the rigid etiquette and stifling social formalities that can dictate how one can and cannot enjoy the game elsewhere in the world. In general, there aren’t the peripheral judgements that can accompany just exiting one’s vehicle in the parking lot of many clubs around the country. Here, it’s just golf, the game. It’s about hitting good shots, being outside, enjoying the sweet dope of tropical air. It transcends the lore of our beloved pastime. It’s still world-class, just in a more casual environment. So for anyone who’s never played or anyone scared of accusations of hobnobbing, relax. It’s 2021 and it’s okay to start playing golf. I promise. In the words of Winston Welborn, who after decades of surfing and kiting and fighting fires and co-creating Hawaii Life itself, “It’s good to try something new that you don’t know if you’ll ever get good at. A month and a half into it, I’m having fun. I’m actually golfing this afternoon. I think I’m a golfer.”

Whether you’re a neurotic longtime player past his prime like me, a stealthy scratch player looking for new terrain to conquer, a weekend warrior seeking a recreational hobby, a timid

novice secretly overwhelmed by it all, a professional type looking to schmooze and booze, or a newbie on the hunt for a healthy social outlet, come play golf in Hawaii and see for yourself just how sweet the suffering really is here. The grass really is greener.

Character Types

The Geezer -

Roger plays a regular \$0.50 skins game on Saturdays and Wednesdays with a loyal crew of regulars. Most don't have anything below a 7-iron in their bag, some smoke cigars, and all have a good time. They go to Duke's for burgers and beers after each round and Roger hasn't tucked his shirt in since the Reagan era.

The Transplant -

Kevin recently moved his family to the islands to escape the rigid and fast-paced life he was living on the mainland. Now an islander, he tees off every weekend morning at 7:30 sharp, always wears navy blue or black and, while he genuinely enjoys playing the game, seems to get through the round as fast as humanly possible. After most rounds, Kevin says a quick hello to his wife and kids then goes electric foil boarding.

Barefoot Guy -

One of approximately 85 Hawaiian residents with the nickname Big Wave Dave, this particular Dave doesn't play before noon, doesn't break 100, and doesn't take too kindly to wearing shoes. For Aristotle, life was both tragedy and comedy. For Dave, golf is a slapstick. For real, the guy is never not smiling and his lack of concern for results is nothing short of enviable.

Surfer Dude -

Trent is an ex-pro surfer who's recently taken up the game, mostly due to the fact that he's in his late 30s now and peer pressure has subsided enough for him to not feel ashamed about playing. Though his exterior never betrays it, he's internally in a regular state of conflict given he's both competitive and utterly abysmal at the game.

Lady Golfer -

Constantly swimming upstream in a male-dominated sport and world, Sheena is part of a small minority of female members at an exclusive and prestigious private club. She's tough as nails, has come in under 80 a handful of times and even though she's a more consistent player and makes more money than most of her male counterparts, she still has to put up with four hours of chauvinistic banter throughout the round.

Neophyte -

A true waterman with a lifetime of fearlessly facing the vast, humbling and powerful wrath of the ocean, Ken still feels like a pimple-faced freshman when he arrives to the course. A mid-life crisis and the stark reality that he's not his former self in the water has forced a recreational

pivot as he courageously attempts to mingle with the plebeians on land. However, being a consummate athlete and compulsive perfectionist, even though he started six months ago he already broke 90 and will likely get into the low 80s by next year. Asshole.

The Overshopper -

Hyper apparel-focused with his new Outerknown shirt, sneaker-style soft spikes, white leather belt, hybrid wet/dry shorts, and shiny new PXGs (even though he's a 14 handicap), Tom has yet to understand what life in the islands is really all about. Given enough time, he may get there one day.

The "Relic" -

Plaid-laden with an ascot cap, huge watch and tasseled spikes, Victor relishes the chance to connect with the roots of the game while at the same time disregarding the fact that it's 84 and sunny. He claims wooden-shafted clubs give him a better "feel for the ball," refuses to take a mulligan, and keeps an excel spreadsheet of his scores. Every Christmas, he posts a chart of his play throughout the year on his office wall, like a shrine.

The Golf Pro -

Stephen was raised in Wisconsin. He caddied as a youth. He earned a scholarship to play collegiately. He climbed the ranks of private clubs, seasonally ping-ponging his way back and forth between the midwest and Florida. He took up a last-minute invitation with some colleagues to golf in the islands seven years ago. While here, he met a girl. He went back to Florida, followed job postings for six months, found a job, moved back, married said girl and now lives a life beyond his wildest dreams.