

Something From Thistle Dhu

by GARY WIREN

The literature of golf is fascinating. What a variety! If golf writing was limited to "How I Hit A Golf Ball Great" by (fill in name of current tour star), it would be tedium personified. But the variety of offerings—history, psychology, novels, humor, records, and those wonderful books about the courses themselves suggests a whole spectrum of reading material that can satisfy the golf addict's compulsion when he can't physically be on the course.

I don't really know why I started collecting golf books, but I do know now there is a great satisfaction in having them here, on the shelves, ready to provide some new twist, another golf adventure, a fact, or bit of minutia; like loyal friends when I need them. About five years ago, it struck me that not all golfers were so lucky to have such a wealth of reading available to them. When I came upon a particularly interesting story, it seemed a shame to not share it with my golfing friends, and so I decided to start sharing. The result is a quarterly newsletter I call "Thistle Dhu" and of "who knows how many editions on anything to do with golf."

Since the GREEN SECTION RECORD is "A USGA Publication on Turf Management," I have been asked to share some of the old golf stories that relate to your profession as golf course superintendents. I hope you will find them as enjoyable as I.

THISTLE DHU— A STRANGE NAME FOR A GOLF PAPER?

First, let me explain the odd given name of the newsletter.

"In 1930 'Tom Thumb' golf courses were a national craze (some of you may well remem-

ber). There was hardly a town in the United States that didn't have one or two of these miniature courses, while large cities sprouted them by the hundreds. For some unknown reason, when the spring of 1931 rolled around, people forgot about miniature golf as quickly as they had discovered it. Its rebirth was not to be seen again until after World War II.

"The first of the small golf courses can be traced to the artistically planned layout in the front yard of James Barber's winter home at Pinehurst, N.C. Its name was "Thistle Dhu." This peculiar Scotch-sounding name had its origin in the fact the E. H. Wiswell, who constructed the tiny course, was not quite satisfied with his work. He turned to Barber with a sigh of relief and said, 'This'll do.' Someone with a flair for Scottish names supplied the burr, and the name stuck." (From H. B. Martin's 50 Years of American Golf)

My feelings being similar to Mr. Wiswell's after finishing the first issue, prompted me to choose his remark for the masthead of my paper.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE BUNKER

There have been some wonderful stories written about courses that were in books not dealing primarily with golf architecture or maintenance. Here is one on golf's favorite hazard—the bunker.

"My first knowledge of bunkers was gained, as most golfers are probably aware, on the links of the Royal North Devon Club at Westward Ho, where I served an apprenticeship first as caddie, and later as groundsman. In those early days, the made bunker was unknown. On such a light sandy soil as the Westward Ho links are situated,

A fairway bunker at St. Andrews, Scotland showing the shoring up of the sides.



it took little for a bunker to make its appearance after a dozen players had used the old-fashioned lofting irons. The turf was easily cut, and once this protection was gone, the continual tramping soon broadened the scar until it spread some yards around. After the start the work went on merrily. The North-west wind, the prevailing wind in that part of the country, simply scooped sand away, and where some three months before had been a divot-marked patch of turf now appeared an irregular hollow of sand gradually being widened by the caving in of the sides under pressure of the players' and caddies' feet.

"One could see the bunkers grow larger day by day, until means had to be taken to keep them within reasonable bounds. This was accomplished by disused railway sleepers or other such timber being driven into the sand, forming a background upon which was nailed wide pieces of board the whole depth of the bank. The space between the boards and the bank was filled in and turfed over level with the surrounding country, but such is the aggravating nature of the wind, that no sooner had one bunker been properly harnessed than it immediately started to make another." (From *The Art of Golf* by Joshua Taylor, 1913)

There have probably been many times in your golfing career when you couldn't have cared less how the bunker was invented—particularly when you were in one. But since you are in charge of caring for them, I thought you'd like to know how it all got started.

GREEN\$ SUPERINTENDENT\$

This next story was written for the benefit of all my golf course superintendent friends.

"The story goes that some years ago, a wealthy but penny-pinching club was determined to have the best course in the entire area, so they sent the head greenkeeper to the National Greenkeepers Association of America conference. Upon his return, the green committee eagerly met with the man. 'What all did you learn?' he was asked. 'First of all,' he said, 'I learned that I am the lowest paid greenkeeper in the country!'"

But times are better. Read this from the record of the Aberdeen Golf Links of July 6, 1820, as printed in the book, *British Golf Links*, by Horace Hutchinson (1897):

"The secretary was instructed to pay Alexander Monro at the rate of £4 (approximately \$15) per annum for taking charge 'of the links and providing accommodation for the members' club boxes,' and for that sum Monro is to pay 'particular attention to keeping the holes in good order' and to 'be at the call of the members on all necessary occasions.' If that was not bad enough, the above allowance was diminished in 1822 to £3, an alteration which

may be regarded as an illustration of the well-known prudence of the Aberdonians in financial matters."

GETTING BACK

Sometimes the superintendents have their sweet revenge. Such was the case at Muirfield in 1966 when Jack Nicklaus won the British Open.

"The rough has been allowed to grow as high as four feet in some places in order to keep the course from being torn apart. With narrow fairways, mirror-like greens, and the hellish rough, players became ultra-cautious. Many players left their woods in their bags on the tight driving holes. As one reporter put it, 'Never have so many irons flashed so tentatively on so many tees, nor have swings grown so much shorter, nor have heads risen so fast.'" (From *Golfers Digest*, Ken Bowden, 1967)

GIMME PUTTS

In Thistle Dhu, there have been a few short quips about golf courses that have been placed in a column called "Gimme Putts," not too original but it fills the bill. Here are a few that I wouldn't want you to miss . . .

"A frightening description of golf's hazards . . .

"On each side bristle all kinds of furzy horrors—whins, thick tufted heather and many other situations of distress for a wandering ball." (From H. B. Farnie's *Golfer's Manual*, 1857)

"A golf course put a lagoon at the bend of a dogleg hole and called it their 'water-on-the-knee hole.'" (Reg Manning)

"Did you know that the year 1857 saw the introduction of the first spiked golfing shoes?"

"Dave Marr tells of going into a club in Colorado and seeing this notice on the board: 'Six inches of snow will make our greens unusually slow this weekend!'"

"The grounds on which golf is played are called links, being the barren sandy soil from which the sea has retired in recent geological times . . . links are too barren for cultivation; but sheep, rabbits, geese and professionals pick up a precarious livelihood on them." (From *The Art of Golf* by Simpson, 1892)

It is not too difficult to find in the writing (sometimes between the lines) the player's feelings toward different kinds of courses. The Scots were never ones, however, for writing in between. If they believed it—they said it. Most of them of course preferred the old "links land" courses. In these last two stories you might get an inclination as to why:

DUNCAN LIKES THE OLD COURSE

George Duncan was an unusually fine British player of the early rubber-core ball days; his career paralleling in time that of H. Chandler Egan, our American Amateur Champion of



A pot bunker at St. Andrews, Scotland.

1904-05. George was not the first, nor certainly the last good player to express a deep respect for the Old Course at St. Andrews. Here is why he liked it.

"If I am asked which is my favorite course, I give my answer unhesitatingly—the Old Course at St. Andrews. I think it is the best, and if I have to play a match which is really of some importance, that is where I want to play it. St. Andrews has a character and features that you find nowhere else. What I like about it is this, that you may play a very good golf shot there and find yourself in a very bad place. That is the real game of golf. I don't want everything levelled and smoothed away so that by no possible chance can your ball take an unlucky turn in a direction you don't like. People think and talk too much about 'fairness.'" (From *In Praise of Golf*, Evans and Scott, 1950.)

And finally . . .

TO SEA OR NOT TO SEA?

At one time there raged a fierce controversy over the merits and demerits of sea-side links land vs. park or inland golf courses. With the absence of natural sea-side turf in this country, the park course, with its artificial hazards, became the rule. Some imagination in current golf course design is bringing back a few of the elements of older courses that were "naturally designed" on the shore of the British Isles.

Here Robert Hunter, in his book *The Links*, 1926, provides us with some insight and understanding about the two:

"The essential difference between the best seaside golf and that of the inland variety is that, in the first case, one is battling with nature—as one does in climbing a mountain or in sailing a boat—while in the other, one is faced with problems of human origin. No

matter with what heights he is faced or with what winds assailed, the sportsman in battling with nature makes no complaint. But immediately when he is faced with problems of human origin, he feels justified, if he finds them too difficult, in turning upon their creator with murder in his heart.

"Golf course architects have built many holes that are deserving of censure, but what would we think if they were to offer us some of the problems frequently met with on the links? As instances: not three yards square of level land; blind tee shots and blind seconds (there are 12 blind approaches on one sea-side course); bunkers 'just where a good tee shot should be placed'; ridges in front of a green forcing certain shots into a hazard; and so on. It is not advisable to start with a one-shot hole, and yet this was done until recently at Muirfield. It would be accounted absurd to ask a golfer, starting from any tee and especially the first, to knock a ball along the ground with a putter for 50 yards in order to have a chance to play his second to the green—and yet that is usually our introduction to the exquisite North Berwick! What architect would not struggle hard to avoid having an out-of-bounds paralleling the first hole? Yet both at Prestwick and Hoylake we are faced with that. Blind one-shot holes are most undesirable, and yet the Maiden at Sandwich was sacrificed under protest, and who would dare lay his hands on the Sandy Parlour at Deal?

"So goes golf on the links—those sacred bits of God's earth—where men have battled for generations, like the sailor or the mountaineer, with what nature has placed before them."

But in this country, to heck with nature and tradition—right men? What superintendent would dare not manicure his course? What blasphemy!