

Dear Scotland –

I am a pilgrim. Scotland can never be given to the casual visitor. It is not necessary to say that either Young or Old Tom would have beaten any of us into the middle of next week to know and have known, loved and played over the links to which I was introduced. Now returned to my home, I realize this pilgrimage had been far too few for the years of my life.

I arrived in Inverness to play the World Hickory Championship on the Saturday prior to the opening tee shot. Sunday was a free ranging day and I anticipated playing at Inverness Golf Club, right next to Kingsmill Hotel. Unable to secure a tee time, I ventured into the Centre City, only a 15-minute walk. Once there, my desire to play golf fell away. The city is festooned with stone buildings centuries old, including the Abertarff House, built in 1593 - 27 years before the Pilgrims teed-off to a New World. The workmanship of the ancient buildings is stunning; intricate stone carvings on The Town Hall, a steeple rising 10 stories, a Greek columned hotel and pub, even a foundry, built in 1827 that looks more like a Wall Street financial house than a place where iron is forged. People roamed the streets. They were open and friendly. I had to say no more than “Can I pet your dog, I haven’t petted one since I left the States,” and was greeted with “Sure you can, come sit and join me in a cup of coffee.” I met folks from all over Scotland and Europe. Everybody took the time to bask in the sun, avoid the chilled air, and talk about everything from politics to golf. What started as a 10:00 casual walk ended at 5:00 and the time went as fast and was as enchanting as any round I’ve played.

**FORTROSE & ROSEMARKIE.** The Championship started on Monday, October 10th with contesting the Archie Baird Trophy at Fortrose & Rosemarkie Golf Club. This one-day event pitted teams from all over the globe playing a better-ball stroke play event.

The course was built in 1793 and in continuous use since that date. We played the same untouched terrain as golfers using these links 229 years ago with only the greens and tees improved by modern horticulture. It was here that I met the Scottish winds. So different from any gusts with which I am familiar. They do not blow with the hot fury so familiar to Texans; winds that parch the throat and leather the skin. They are not the uplifting gusts found in the North and Northeast that can rattle your soul with their tempest. Certainly, they are not the bone chilling blasts that greet us in winter where the whirlwinds take a hundred daggers to our bones. No, Scottish winds are something quite different. They are the circle of life. You reach the course in the morning, tempted by the lilting promise of golf on a pastoral day, the beginning of life and joy. Into your round, the breezes harden - filled with an ominous chill. Then, suddenly they surround in you in a cold and clammy shroud, the feeling of a tomb all around you and you know that the Reaper cannot be far behind. Ominous and treacherous, the winds confound you at every turn. Then, without warning, the clouds part and the sun promises what every golfer longs for – Resurrection for a renewed strength of spirit and the promise of tomorrow’s round.

Fortrose & Rosemarkie perhaps looked a bit easy as I read the scorecard on the first tee, but the card was cunningly deceptive. The course is located on the Chanonry Peninsula in the Black Sea, hard against the Firth of Moray. The bunkers are close to the greens and inordinately deep, the fairways are the natural terrain sculpted by eons of wind, rain, and wildlife into distended hillocks, valleys, and hiding places, while the gorse and whins are thickly uncomfortable and will destroy even the best laid shots. As with all of the courses I played, it is possible to play an approach shot straight on a bee line to the flag. And, if played to perfection all may go well. But let it only be crooked by the slightest margin or get an unkind kick and trouble will be your portion.

I found out almost immediately that Scottish golf is quite different from the American brand. The player cannot overpower the links. There are far too many places where gambling on a shot's roll is unwise. The golfer cannot play the course to his amusement; he must let the course give the player his due as it sees fit. Certainly, it is a fool's errand to tease the bunkers on any of the courses played in the Championship. Give them a wide berth and do not attempt to avoid these greedy, lurking enemies by mere inches or feet.

ROYAL DORNOCH. Golf along this linksland was inspired by John, the 13<sup>th</sup> Earl of Sutherland, although records exist that as early as 1457 golf was played "on the town lands along the seashore." Sir Robert Gordon described the Dornoch links in 1628: "About this town along the sea coast are the fairest and largest links or green fields of any part of Scotland, fitt for archery, golfing, ryding and all other exercises, they doe surpass the fields of Montrose or St. Andrews." Old Tom Morris laid out the course in 1886. In 1906, King Edward VII granted a Royal Charter to the course. Both Donald Ross and his brother, Alex, were born in Dornoch. It is no wonder that Donald Ross' trademark was the inverted saucer greens that Dornoch features on every hole.

Quite simply, the most difficult course I've ever played. We played this course at approximately 6,400 yards. Like all of our courses, this one was hard by the sea and the winds were treacherous. Either Providence or Tom Morris made nearly every green plateaued above the fairway with only a single perfect landing spot, then swept away the sides and front like a receding tide. These greens are never easy to approach and when the winds sweep off the see of the higher elevations, approach shots are at the whim of fate. The plateau structure demands of the golfer that the approach shot be sublimely played. They will not allow him to merely toss the ball into the air with a lofted club. The modest ambition that the ball will come down somewhere on the green and bite is folly and scores of double- or triple- bogey will result with the accompanying frustration and rancor for the course. Moreover, the ground a Royal Dornoch is never helpful. At best, it is no more than strictly impartial.

Many of the holes I played are memorable, with some approaching stark terror. For example, take the par-3 sixth. It played at 160 yards, but the perfidy was boundless. The entire hole sloped dramatically left to right. However, hooking the tee shot into the hole was mere suicide as the entire right side of the green sloped into a vast chasm of closely mown grass. Fading the tee shot meant taking an iron over a patch of gorse as thick as thieves in Bogart's *Casablanca*. Miss the gorse, and 3 bunkers of unusual depth and corruption awaited your ball. Miss the green short and the false front repelled your ball into Dante's inferno. I forgot to mention that the green is 50 yards deep, so choose your club carefully.

What was remarkable is that standing on the 18<sup>th</sup> tee made me think about all of the people in the last 400+ years who stood exactly in this same spot. Although my score did not reflect the number of high-quality shots I hit (as it never will in the throes and torment of a tempest) I was grateful for the energy to play, for my playing partners from Switzerland, Denmark, and Sweden, and the honor to battle this Scottish giant.

NAIRN (The Championship Course.) Hard along the Firth of Moray, it is a wilderness of whin and heather. Almost new, having been built in 1887. Robert Finlay, a member of Parliament, Viscount, and Britain's Lord Chancellor, brought on Old Tom Morris to finish the original design by Andrew Simpson. In 1907, James Braid extended the course, altered tees and greens and gave singular subtlety to the grounds. In the 1920's Ben Sayers put his handiwork into Nairn. Shortly thereafter, Braid came back for minor tweaks. Finally, C.K. Cotton added length prior to the 1999 Walker Cup matches held there. Most recently, the club retained

esteemed architects Tom Mackensie and Martin Ebert for a renovation project. Nevertheless, the course remains substantially the links course that James Braid established on this land.

“Nae wind, nae rain, nae golf” was certainly true at Nairn. And, like all the courses played during the Championship, just let the wind blow, and maybe some rain fall, and you'll find out whether you can play. You won't need your rangefinder. It won't be of much assistance. You'll appreciate some good waterproofs, however. Golf is a both a test when you take it and a pleasure when you pass, because when the winds blowing, and you find yourself on a true links, you probably have umpteen shots you might play. But, you'd better give it some thought about your choice.

For all the tinkering and tweaking over the years, Nairn is very natural in appearance and, in places, natural almost to the verge of roughness. However, don't confuse the harsh contours of any of the courses played with the fairway grass itself. It is a wonderous fescue, and perhaps the finest, smoothest, and most delicate grass I've played. Divots are thin and clean and the compact ground inspires confidence in making well-struck shots. Nairn played to about 6300 yards and made great demands on everybody's athletic powers. Although the fairways look generous, generally, there is plenty of rough at the sides, including some particularly pernicious whins with tall, wiry stalks, lurking to grab your hosel and shoot your ball to the left.

Nairn offers a beautiful bit of natural golf country, enjoying a perfect sense of peace and quietude. Although hard by the Firth, the drumming of waves seems less present than Royal Dornoch or Fortrose & Rosemarkie. It has been described as a “charming spot where we may play golf that is challenging without being too desperately difficult.” Charming for certain, although “desperately difficult” is in the mind of the beholder and woe be to him that is not straight, far, and sure.

The most charming feature of Nairn is the Bothy. It is a stone cottage dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century built to house fisherman going to the shore. Immediately across a small pathway is the Bothy ice house; a Quonset hut carved into the land, used to store the freshly caught fish.

**CASTLE STUART:** Snaking around the Firth of Moray and up into higher elevations is the modern but classically-inspired Castle Stuart links. Built in 2018 by Gil Hanse and Mark Parsinen, the course is very clever; the holes are generous off the tee with large landing areas and fairways without the ominous obstacles of either Fortrose & Rosemarkie or Royal Dornoch. However, what this course giveth, it taken away, as nearly every hole features an ever-tightening neck toward the green, demanding precise approach shots to demanding green complexes.

The course features two distinct levels, with the higher elevations beginning on your walk from the 11<sup>th</sup> green to the 12<sup>th</sup> tee. All you have to do is traverse a ¼-mile hill featuring a 30% incline before you reach a 400+ yard par-4 that continues straight up another hill. Don't hook your tee shot because, if you aren't trapped in a 20-ft deep bunker, your next shot to the green is absolutely blind, uphill and you have to hit it when you're quite breathless. Once on this level, the course snakes back toward the clubhouse, but, because of the height of the plateau the winds are even stronger than at sea level. The 18th hole is a monster par-5, directly into the wind. The tee shot is forced left because the right side is littered with the remains of all who would dare to test a cavernous valley filled with all manner of devils, demons, and orgres befitting a Stephen King novel. The last sentence may be overstating the case slightly, but I certainly am not going after a sliced tee shot. Once your tee shot is in play, the fun begins as the hole dog-legs right and placement for your 3<sup>rd</sup>-shot approach boils down to an area about the size of a large envelope. Once on the massive green, good luck staying still over your putt because the prevailing wind buffets you to and fro like a ragdoll.

While Castle Stuart is more updated than traditional Scottish courses, it is the splendor of the views, coupled with its playability off the tee, that rates this track Stuart among the very best modern courses in the UK.

Before I leave Castle Stuart, I must mention the par-3 11<sup>th</sup> hole. It is a dazzling charmer that plays about 150 yards to a green that is as wide as a one-lane country road, set diagonally to the tee, with the Moray Firth on the left, and a closely mown runoff on the right. It's tough to get the correct distance because the prevailing wind is to your back, making an otherwise standard 150-yarder something of a desperate challenge for the finest strikers.

EPILOGUE. It is that utter self-abandonment to golf that gives Scotland it's attractiveness. At one course, while on the practice range, I spoke to a gentleman that did not even play golf. That, in Scotland, is itself remarkable, but more wonderful still, was that he joined me in golfing conversation so rationally that I did not even discover his secret until our parting. Such is the Scottish soul and wit. If you don't go at least once, can you truly say you've golfed your ball?

My personal thanks to Hamish Steedman, the Chairman of the World Hickory Championship. Without his vision, inspiration, and dedication to honor the game, this tournament would not happen. In addition, I should mention that Hamish is the owner of St. Andrews Golf Company. Visit his website at <https://www.standrewsgolfco.com/>. They are craftsman in the most traditional sense and have a wide variety of hickory offerings.

All of us hickory brethren owe Hamish a debt of gratitude. I raise a class of 15-year old Balvenie to toast him.

#### TIPS ON TECHNIQUE

I would be remiss if I didn't share with my hickory brethren some important tips if you are going to Scotland.

- Don't plan the trip by yourself. It will be a long and frustrating venture and ultimately, you'll have to rely on a professional. I recommend with the highest commendation Platinum Golf Scotland. You can find them at <https://platinumgolfscotland.com/>. You can email them directly from the website. Stuart French and Lynda Robinson are the principals of this wholly top-notch organization. They know everybody, they know every course, and they know the best hotels and restaurants.
- Don't bother taking American dollars and Euros. They only accept British or Scottish pounds. You can exchange dollars for pounds at your local bank or at currency exchanges in the airport. The best bet is to use your credit card as that will give you the best exchange rate.
- Most folks in Europe do not tip. If you have some pounds to tip your cab driver, doorman, concierge, waiter, waitress or anybody else, you'll be a hero. Maybe not like Robert the Bruce, but a hero nonetheless. In the hotel, word spreads quickly about this and your service will be impeccable.
- You'll need a converter to plug in the outlets so that the electricity there will accommodate your American electronics. These converters are easily purchased on Amazon.  
[https://www.amazon.com/s?k=electricity+converter+us+to+europe&crd=1OS86R6W4FPYS&sprefix=electricity+conve%2Caps%2C118&ref=nb\\_sb\\_ss\\_deep-retrain-ln-ops-acceptance\\_2\\_17](https://www.amazon.com/s?k=electricity+converter+us+to+europe&crd=1OS86R6W4FPYS&sprefix=electricity+conve%2Caps%2C118&ref=nb_sb_ss_deep-retrain-ln-ops-acceptance_2_17)

They are inexpensive, so buy 2, just in case.

- The electrical outlets in Scotland need to be turned on like a light switch. Push the bottom part of the switch, not the top part. When you activate the outlet the top will show either a red color or a red light.
- They drive on the opposite side of the road from America. My advice is like the commercials you see on TV – “Professional driver on a closed course, don’t try this at home.” Platinum Golf Scotland will arrange all of your transportation everywhere and if you want to go somewhere special there are lots of taxicabs.
- Don’t overload your bags with golf balls. They have them for purchase over there at reasonable prices.
- I recommend highly using Ship Sticks to get your clubs over there. The price is not outrageous, the service is excellent, and you can pack extra stuff in your golf travel bag.
- Scotland is famous for . . . well . . . Scotch. You can bring back 2 bottles duty free. You can also gamble that you won’t be asked to open your luggage when you return to the U.S. and bring back additional bottles, but that’s up to you.
- When you order a drink in Scotland, they measure the liquor like it’s gold, not like a “free pour” in the U.S. So, consider ordering a double. The prices are very reasonable so you won’t be fleeced. If you’re a beer drinker, try one called Tennent’s. I’m not much of a beer drinker, but I liked this lager.
- Television is much different. I couldn’t find any news channels like the BBC or CNN, but it’s worth it just to see the commercials.
- Take some time to speak with the locals. I don’t mean like just asking for directions. I mean like actually sitting down and talking to them. They are very interested in the United States and as your conversation winds along, you’ll find that you become fascinated with them and Scotland.
- Don’t be frustrated by the wind, rain, and the fact that you’ll have to walk the courses carrying your own bag or using a trolley. I might suggest that you don’t even keep score. Just appreciate that this land is the home of our game and take time to smell the sea, fall in love with the grass, fall in hate with the gorse, and fall in love with your partner.