

The Golfer

The golfer stood on the seventeenth tee with his whole future flashing before his eyes. He envisioned the sweet taste of victory, the boasting to his friends, and most of all that sweet trip to Pebble Beach. All he needed to do was make two pars – something he had done thousands of times before. These were no two ordinary holes though – they were beasts. The 17th: a daunting 225-yard par 3 with a lake surrounding the green. The 18th: a 467-yard par 4 that had been playing well over par to the day. The golfer knew he had to stop thinking ahead; he had to remain in the moment. The day had gone exactly how he had planned it. His conservative strategy of hitting woods off tees and aiming consistently for the middle of the green had paid off. He stood currently at 1 over par, the exact qualifying score he needed to advance to the prestigious US Amateur championship.

The golfer took a step back. “This is not the time to think ahead,” he told himself again. He went through his practice routine once more without even noticing the stares of his playing partners and caddies. He took three steps back, took two accentuated practiced swings, lined up his middle-of-the-green target with his club of choice, and stepped up to the ball with both feet together before picking his spot three yards in front of the ball to align himself. The golfer didn't even take a breath before he started his backswing. At this point there was no thought involved. It was trust that all of the hours of practice were going to pay off, trust that the thousands of dollars of lessons would come to fruition, trust that the club he held in his hands would do what it was designed to do. It was merely seconds before the 4-iron came into contact with the ball and the golfer in one fluid motion followed through to his perfectly balanced finish. He looked up at the small white ball with utter desperation. What this one ball decided to do he knew would determine whether or not his dreams came true. The ball started at the middle of the green as he had planned but was starting to drift somewhat towards the left, opposite of the right-side pin location. The left side was also where the lake ominously stood in the background, sitting there like a sleeping giant just waiting to destroy everything he had worked so hard for. A ball in the water would almost assuredly lead to a bogey at best and he knew a birdie on the monstrous 18th would be next to impossible. “Get down!” the golfer yelled, begging for the small white ball to listen. The ball took a bounce on the edge of the green and settled onto the fringe roughly 70 feet away from the hole. The golfer was still in business.

He tried not to think as he walked up to the green. Although one of his best friends, Tom, was caddying for him that day, he was not in the mood for a pep talk. As he walked up to the green, putter in hand, the golfer did not think about his impending put, he did not think about the awaiting drive on the 18th, he didn't even think about the fight he had gotten into with his girlfriend the night before; no – he thought of a song. He hummed to himself the song that had been stuck in his head the whole day and round – “Beat of the Music,” by Brett Eldridge. The golfer loved country music, as it calmed him down in moments of anger and got him through moments of boredom. The lyrics of the upbeat songs energized him while those of the serious ones spoke to him. The golfer played the catchy chorus of the song over and over in his head until he finally got to the green. Then, it was go time.

The golfer surveyed his put. It was just about as tough as he could ask for, uphill at the beginning, steeply downhill at the very end, and breaking severely from left to right before from what it looked like leveling out somewhat about 10 feet from the hole. To make things worse, the golfer was unable to mark his ball and line up his put as the ball was not on the green but on the fringe. The golfer picked out his target spot of about 15 feet short and twenty feet to the left. He looked up at towards the spot and made three practice strokes while Tom stood tending the pin. He stepped up to his Titleist ProV1x marked with a blue 7 above the i and took another look at his spot. He never even once looked at the hole. It what seemed like a matter of milliseconds before the ball was rolling. The golfer made sure to keep his head down but couldn't help himself to look up maybe a tad too early. The ball rolled across the green for what seemed like minutes. The golfer started to get excited as the ball rolled almost exactly on his intended line and started to slow down towards the hole. “No, it can’t be,” the golfer said to himself as he started to lift his putter in jubilation. “Oooh,” everyone exalted in unison as the ball lipped out of the cup. “Sit down,” the golfer said out loud as the ball finished about 4 feet away from the hole. There was still more work to be done.

The golfer read his put as his playing partner went through his routine. Sitting at 6 over par, his playing partner was out of the running and knew it just as well as the golfer. He knew this was the golfer’s show now and quickly two-putted his 20 footer for a par. The golfer continued to read his put. Tom, who most of the time would help him on puts like these, remained silent in the background as he sensed his friend did not want any help on this occasion.

It was the type of intuition that only a best friend could know. Tom knew how important this moment was - this was everything. The golfer again took his three practice strokes while looking directly at the hole and stepped up to his ball. This was a dead straight put, one that could only be missed by a truly abysmal stroke or worse yet out of nerves. The golfer had never felt anything like this before, the pressure of what seemed like amounted to a lifetime of work. Then he realized, that was exactly what this moment was. The 4-foot put is one of every player's nightmares. It's one that is expected to be made every time but still requires a good stroke and line to find the cup. Even the best in the world will only make these about 90 percent of the time. Before he knew it he had started his backswing and made contact with the ball. The golfer did not have a chance to lift his head up before he heard the ball fall into the hole. Without any show of excitement or joy, the golfer picked up his ball from the hole and started walking to the 18th tee.

The golfer surveyed the beautiful 18th hole before him at Pine Woods Country Club. Pine Woods, located in the golfer's home town of Bethesda, MD, was one of the premier courses in the state, hosting numerous Major championships. The golfer recalled back to the 1987 US Open, where Lee Trevino needed to make a par at the very same 18th hole to win the tournament. He did just that – and the golfer was hoping for similar success. The long par 4 was uphill all the way, making it play even longer than listed in the yardage book. The golfer tried not to think about the bogey he had made on the hole the previous day, although for some reason he couldn't get it out of his mind. He didn't even watch his playing partner tee off, who still had honors from his birdie on the par 5 16th. The golfer repeated his pre-shot routine once more and stepped up to his ball. “This is the most important shot of my life,” he thought as he took an extra breath. As he started to take his backswing something felt off. It's just one of those feelings that a player gets sometimes, but once in motion the swing can never be stopped. He tried to recover on his downswing but it was too late. He made contact with the ball and looked up to sure enough see it start dead left towards the trees. Although he pulled it, he had at least made solid contact. Without saying a thing, the golfer flipped his driver over to Tom and took off towards the fairway. “What did I just do?” the golfer thought to himself, but tried his best to put any negative thoughts out of his mind. “Beat of the Music” once again rang strong in his head.

“This is not good,” the golfer thought as he surveyed his ball. The ball sat on an odd mixture of grass and pine needles, nestled roughly 2 yards away from a towering oak. He

walked over to the fairway to get a distance to the center of the green, which was all he cared about at this point. After finding a near yardage plate and walking off the yardage to his ball, the golfer calculated that he had 186 to the center of the green, about 172 to the front. He tried to find anything, desperately not wanting to punch out and be forced to get up and down from 150 yards to save his tournament. Then he saw it – a small gap in the trees that stood about 20 yards in front of him between his ball the green. The golfer thought maybe, just maybe if he could squeeze the ball through that gap and hit it high enough he could carry the ball to the green.

“6 iron,” the golfer said to Tom.

“Are you su-”

“6 iron.”

Tom handed the golfer his 6 iron as requested, as he stared down that miniscule gap between the trees. The golfer surveyed the shot one more time, one last chance to back out and chip out. In all honesty, this was one of the golfer’s favorite parts of the game, thinking of creative shots to hit out of trouble to salvage par. Usually though, if he didn't pull it off he would loose a ball or at worst was down five bucks to one of his buddies. This was for the US Amateur: the opportunity of a lifetime. It was time to decide, what was it going to be? As if there was ever any doubt in the world, the golfer started his pre-shot routine, never taking his eyes off that gap. There was no turning back now. He walked up to his ball, putting it slightly forward in his stance to get the necessary height to clear the trees, and couple seconds of later – *whack*. He made perfect contact. The ball was out of sight at first, but he didn’t hear anything, which is always a positive sign. The golfer sprinted out into the fairway to try to catch a sight of the ball. And then he saw it – soaring majestically like an eagle destined for the center of the green. He didn't even have time to comprehend that he had just pulled off the shot of his life, just begging for it to fall peacefully onto the putting surface. As much as he wanted to, though, he didn’t see the ball land on the green.

“Where’d it go?” the golfer desperately asked.

“Over,” Tom replied. “Helluva shot though.”

The golfer ignored Tom’s compliment and anxiously asked, “What’s over there?”

“Bunker.”

Of coarse it was in the bunker. His bunker game was his one true weak spot, as he feared the sand every time he entered it. The previous day he was 0 for 3 for up and downs in the sand,

resulting in two bogeys and one par. In fact, the golfer only then realized that this was the first time he had hit it in the sand the entire day, extremely impressive considering the massive amount of sand traps that existed on the championship-level course. Tom handed the golfer his 60 degree wedge as he walked up to the green to take a closer look at the once more most important shot of his life.

Even if he didn't make it, the golfer had still performed far beyond anyone's expectations going into the day. In fact, he was pretty sure no one there knew who the hell he was before the day prior, when he posted a 1 over par score that was 2 behind the lead but tied for the qualifying score. See, the golfer was unlike most of the other players in the field that day. He did not play true competitive junior golf, not seriously taking the game up until his freshman year of high school. Always a basketball player first growing up, he realized he was too slow and well, too white to keep up with the intense world of Washington D.C. basketball. After a fun-filled day out with his dad to try out the game of golf, he was hooked. Why not give golf a try? It had been 5 years since that day, and though the golfer had achieved moderate success in high school golf and a couple tournaments, he had never been close to anything of this magnitude. This was arguably the biggest amateur tournament in the world, with the winner and runner-up gaining invitations to the Masters and US Open. It was full of college players who one day aspired to play on the PGA Tour. He was just a golfer who had managed to get hot at the right time. He didn't even tell his parents and friends about his success on the first day, not entertaining the thought that his miracle success could be replicated. He thought about the looks on their faces if he were to tell them he qualified for the US Amateur in Pebble Beach. A glaring smile came across his face. Without even realizing it, the golfer had arrived at the greenside bunker. The smile quickly faded.

The ball was buried on the back lip of the bunker. Not only did he face an extremely difficult lie, but also the ball would be significantly below his feet on a downslope. He tried, but he couldn't even envision a bunker shot more difficult than this unless he was hitting from an actual beach onto a small piece of glass. Nonetheless, the golfer walked onto the green to survey what he faced. The only positive element of the shot was that he had plenty of green to work with – if he could just get the ball up and onto the green than the downslope could potentially take the ball all the way to the hole. He picked out an ideal landing spot about 5 feet onto the green and made his way back to his ball. He quickly realized that this was not a matter of where

he wanted to get the ball onto the green, but just about getting it onto the putting surface at all. Then, just like all the others, he went through his pre-shot routine, never letting that landing spot escape his focused mind. He played the shot over and over in his mind, just getting enough distance on the shot to propel the ball forward onto the green. He returned his gaze down to the ball and had a renowned sense of doubt befall upon his mind. The golfer was not a religious person but never prayed harder than in this moment. He took a deep breath, looked up at the target, and swung down as hard as he could several inches behind the ball. He felt the club dig down into the sand, but could not tell where the ball was headed. He looked up in amazement to find that the ball had indeed gotten out of the bunker, although headed somewhat to the left of his intended target. The ball landed nearly the exact distance the golfer had intended, although he at once realized the ball had little to no spin coming out of that horrendous lie. The ball rolled down to the left and past the pin, eventually nestling roughly 20 feet away from the hole. The small gallery that had formed above the green applauded, recognizing the extreme difficulty of the shot. The golfer was sure that many in the crowd did not expect him to qualify; not believing an unheard player could achieve such a feat. The players one shot behind the golfer looked on in hope, knowing they would be headed to a playoff if this putt weren't made. The golfer got out of the bunker, punched the sand out of his black Nike golf shoes, and walked over to his ball.

The putt before him was of about 20 feet, slightly uphill with a moderate left-to-right break – it was a putt the golfer had seen before but never with this magnitude on the line. Having rolled the ball beautifully the past two days on the perfectly manicured Pine Woods greens, the hole looked as if it could not be missed. He envisioned the ball rolling perfectly into the cup and without much time lined up his ball. His playing partners had already finished their rounds by this time, setting the stage for the moment. The gallery looked on as the golfer went through his routine, taking the same three practice strokes and running his eyes up and down the line, all the way into the hole. The golfer tried his best to not think about the consequences this one put had, “this is a put to qualify for the United States Amateur,” the golfer briefly let himself think, “this is my one chance.” He knew a two-put would not suffice, as he would be forced into a playoff with four other players for merely one spot, odds no player would like.

The next four seconds remains somewhat of a blur. He remembered the putter coming into contact with the ball and the pure silence of the moment. Then, without much time in between, he heard the roar of the crowd. Tom tells him he made a sort of inhuman yell when the

ball went in, but he could care less. “What just happened?” the golfer asked himself. The gallery continued to applaud as the golfer picked up his ball from the hole and gave Tom a hug bigger than he had ever given before. He took off his hat, shook the hands of his playing partners, and walked over to the scorer’s table. There is a famous story of a player in the Masters getting disqualified for signing an incorrect scorecard, not for giving himself a better score but actually for writing down a *worse* score than what he had. He would have been in a playoff. Thankfully, this was not one of those occasions, as the scores were all current and in agreement. He went off into the clubhouse for the quick awards ceremony, where dozens of people were waiting to see who had qualified for the Amateur; all of whom shocked to see it was him.

Ed Shakar, the director of the Maryland State Golf Association, walked up to the front of the small gathering area and said, “I and everyone from the MSGA would like to sincerely thank everyone from Pine Woods for a fantastic tournament on a phenomenal golf course. Thanks to each and every competitor and we hope to see everyone out next year. That being said, I think the guys at Pine Woods want to get us out of here (chuckle) so we’ll get straight to it. Congratulations to our winners and good luck out at Pebble!”

He did it – he really did it.

Nick Klein was going to Pebble Beach.