

“Opening the Trunk, Closing the Season”



Photo by Art McCafferty

The winter version of the Otsego Club entrance is much more festive.

By Rob Franciosi

A fresh dusting of snow graced the lawn and “Sleigh Ride” droned. I sat in the car knowing it was time. I’d resisted until the sixth of December, but at last my golf clubs had to make their journey from trunk to basement.

The moment is always bitter-sweet, whether it happens, as it often does in Michigan, around Halloween or during the year’s final month. For this northern golfer the game is laid

to rest, buried under a layer of brilliant white.

I admit that snow can have its golfing benefits. Two weeks before Christmas the normally scruffy course I pass each day shows newly revealed beauty, its humble terrain a giant sculpture gallery. Snow fences, like velvet ropes surrounding a precious work of art, protect all-too-tempting greens from skiers or marauding snowmobilers.

Whatever the visual dazzle of a course in winter, though, the scene saddens me. Golf is a game of aesthetic pleasures, its raptures coming less from successful strikes or well-played holes than from a brilliant white ball in flight against blue sky, across fiery autumn hardwoods, down a fairway’s vivid greens. Today’s overwhelming whiteness only reminds me just how fleeting are such joys, like the rare perfect shot.

I must have presented a curious sight to anyone peering out the window to learn whether the snow had begun again and whether to resume the West Michigan rhythm of shovel-wait-shovel-wait. Hauling clubs from the trunk in my electric blue winter coat and heavy black mittens, I thought, These colors are wrong, or I could pantomime the scene on my Christmas tie--Santa gripping a large candy cane to putt out, while Rudolph tends the flag.

The weight of my unwieldy black bag, stuffed with a late season's harvest of balls, soon brought other scenes to mind as I lugged it from driveway to front porch. A funeral hearse I had just passed on the road. Then a poignant moment from Deadwood in which Sheriff Bullock carries across his porch a coffin he has just built to hold his stepson.

To call my rite a funeral was overstatement, though it did formally bury the golf season. My clubs would now rest in a dark and cold basement corner, beside shelves of wooden clementine boxes filled with shag balls instead of golden citrus. Dozens and dozens of them, always to be hoarded, seldom to be hit. Someday, I tell myself, someday. But season after season, no matter how many I add to a small bucket at the driving range, the stacks grow taller, bursting with used Top Flites, Maxflis, and Pinnacles uncovered in the weeds or woods,

Photo by Art McCafferty

scooped from muddy shallows.

Each lost ball, I suppose, ties me to hundreds of unknown golfers whose hopes--for a moment--were shattered with the sickening thwack of surlyn against pine, or the grim certainty of a hook that starts left and continues its curve, on and on, seemingly forever. A mausoleum of golf dreams.

Yet like the faithful who believe in the body's resurrection, in eternity's promises, doesn't the golfer believe with all his soul in spring's return, the reawakening of a green so alive that the shining ball in descent yields its cold whiteness to a vast verdant life?

Too deep a question, perhaps, for one who mostly wanted to squeeze out one last sunny day above 45 degrees, one more round whose blank and pristine scorecard whispers so much hope, so much possibility. All to be betrayed in the end,

of course, as the smudged scorecards in my bag's pockets remind me.

I bid farewell to those bogey-free fantasies for the long, dark months to come and pull my putter from the bag. My nemesis, the destroyer of low-scoring dreams. With the practice greens resting under a hard white frosting, the dining room rug will have to suffice. If I spend enough time hitting ten-footers across its blues, creams, and violets, somehow ingraining precision and calm, routine and inspiration, who knows what might happen by July?

From a large stack of Christmas cds I hunt one that suits my mood--Jingle Bell Jazz seems right, with Billie Holiday singing "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm." I place a winter white Titleist on the carpet and assume my stance. Follow the line, I tell myself, then focus on the stroke. Don't be distracted by the robin's song or the fresh scent of the new grass. *MG*



A blanket of snow covers the 4th fairway of the Jones course at Treetops.