

FOR THE LOVE OF GOLF

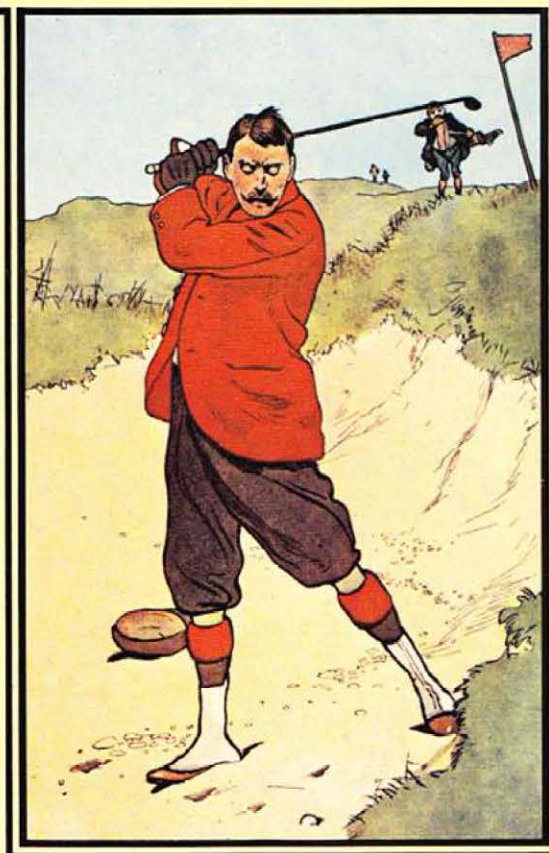
PETER DOBERER



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# FOR THE LOVE OF GOLF

THE BEST OF DOBERER



PETER DOBERER



Writing about golf, says Peter Dobereiner, is like golf itself in that both writer and player are sustained by the dream that next time it will all come right.

In Dobereiner's case, his writing, if not his golf, consistently comes right. Golf correspondent for both the *Observer* and the *Guardian* for many years, feature writer for the top golf magazines in Britain and America and author of numerous books and film scripts on golf, he is without a doubt the most widely read golf writer in the world. Authoritative, controversial, a master of the humorous digression, he is admired and enjoyed even by those with only a passing interest in the game.

Whether he is writing about the maximum number of clubs a player should carry – 'why 14, why not 10?' – or whether his subject is Jack Nicklaus or Joe Ezar (one of golf's most colourful characters who won a handsome wager that he'd shoot a 64 in the Italian Open and did it!), Dobereiner never fails to delight.

Since he began writing professionally about golf some fifteen years ago, Peter Dobereiner has penned up to three million words on the subject. This anthology of his finest work, illustrating the breadth of his interest and imagination, will be welcomed by all those who, like Dobereiner himself, would sacrifice almost every other pleasure 'for the love of golf.'

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To Becky

# For the Love of Golf

The Best of Dobereiner

Peter Dobereiner

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# Foreword

We journalists like to think of ourselves as a raffish, Bohemian lot. We stand back from life, cynically observing the follies and foibles and ferocities of the world and then trying as objectively as we can to write about them in our newspapers. We cannot become involved in life because involvement must mean partiality. If the world brands us as outsiders, we take it as a compliment because that is what we are supposed to be. 'So you're from the *Daily Express*.' The words sound like an accusation. 'Yes, but please don't tell my mother. She thinks I play piano in a brothel.' The ultimate state for a journalist is to become dehumanized. 'Excuse me, Minister, but the press would like a word with you.' That's me, the press, tough and hard as a Heidelberg flat-bed.

Even so, I was touched and flattered to be asked to prepare an anthology of my best work. This meant recognition and respectability. After all, nobody uses a book to wrap up fish and chips, or light a fire, or stuff into the toes of wet golf shoes. There is a permanence about hard covers, a kind of immortality, which is most appealing in comparison with the ephemeral nature of newspapers.

The warm glow of satisfaction lasted right up to the minute I sat down and actually started assembling my material. Then, as I blew the dust from the files and began to read, my mood switched to despair, and finally to panic. Since I began writing professionally about golf in 1965 I have produced between two and three million words on the subject. Surely from such a monstrous slagheap of newspaper and magazine cuttings there must be enough nuggets worthy of salvage for a slim volume?

No. The critical habits I had developed over years of editing other people's work now turned against me. Every piece I picked up I rejected, as too dated, or too boring, or too ignorant, or too opinionated, or too badly written, or a combination of several defects. No man should ever be asked to compile his own anthology because it is like cataloguing your own weaknesses. Not a week goes by without my learning something new about golf. That means, of course, that I was

ignorant of eight things about golf two months ago. Extend that process back nearly twenty years and the result is an impressive accumulation of ignorance. And ill-informed opinion.

Writing about golf is like golf itself, in that one is sustained by the dream that next time it will all come right. However, I make no apology for this selection. In the end, as the deadline bore down like an express train, I burst my bonds of despair and leaped from the track in the nick of time. I reappraised my criteria. Dated? Nonsense! Valuable insight into the attitudes of the day. Boring? They wouldn't have published it in the first place if it had been all that boring. Ignorant? By definition, ignorance is bliss. Opinionated? Excellent – people love taking issue with your ideas, as your daily postbag testifies. Badly written? Fie for such modesty; writing is simply communication and you get the message across most of the time. Victor Hugo had the right idea when he said that good writing was not the product of shutting oneself away in a remote cottage, free from interruption and accessible only to the promptings of the muse; it sprang from the hammering on the door by the baker wanting to get his bill paid.

So this much I can guarantee. The offerings in this book were all produced under the same literary stimulus which gave the world *Les Misérables*.

Peter Dobereiner

The illustrations of *The Seven Ages of Golf* were commissioned by the Fine Art Society in 1899 from my grandfather, John Hassall, and they were issued as a limited edition of colour prints. The golf backgrounds are from Royal St George's, Sandwich, where the family spent many summers.





## Part One

# What's It All About?

*Diversions down some golfing byways*

## How It All Began

It would be pitching it a bit strong to say I lie awake at night pondering the origins of golf. I have better things to ponder during bouts of insomnia, but the subject is intriguing enough. Scholars have probed long and deep to discover how and where golf began. No one with any feeling for the game's past can examine the historical evidence without wondering where the credit for inventing golf rightly belongs.

There have been two main schools of thought on the subject. Some (mainly Scottish) historians maintain stoutly that golf was invented by the Scots. Other (mainly Dutch) historians claim with equal vigour that golf was invented in the Low Countries. The evidence is not conclusive either way.

It is quite certain, as we know from local authority records and paintings, that a golf-like game was played in Holland long before the first official record of golf in Scotland. The Dutch game of *Spel metten colve* (game played with a club) was well established in the thirteenth century, and over the years it developed into separate forms and the name evolved through *colf* to *kolf*. One version was miniaturized and played in a courtyard, or on ice, but mainstream *kolf* was a cross-country game, played in a series of separate 'holes' with implements remarkably similar to early golf clubs and with wooden balls of about two inches in diameter. The ball was even teed up on a small cone of sand exactly as we venerable codgers did in our youth.

All that evidence was purely circumstantial, or totally irrelevant, according to the Scottish school. After all, club and ball cross-country games of one kind or another had been played since Roman times. The point was that all the early Flemish paintings depicting *kolf* showed the participants playing to targets such as church doors, and golf's greatest distinction was that it involved a secondary game, the totally original concept of putting-out into a hole in the ground.

The argument thus revolved around the question: 'What is golf?' If it is accepted that the holing-out process makes golf unique, setting it apart from the Continental versions, then it is possible that a Scot invented this all-important refinement. There is not a shred of



evidence to this effect, but at least it leaves the question open.

Mr S. J. H. Van Hengel, who is the foremost authority on the origins of *kolf*, has made some important discoveries. He managed to date an early beechwood ball, which was discovered driven deep into the earth under the pile of a dockside building, by delving into the records of the building.

The excavations for the new Amsterdam underground railway system turned up remnants of club heads which are similar to early golf clubs.

But the most significant discovery, in the context of the golf argument, was that *kolf* was eventually formalized to the extent of playing to a pole. Doors and the like had proved to be too easy as targets so the pole was introduced. These poles in their turn went through a process of evolution, becoming beautifully carved and ornamented artifacts. Indeed, they were so attractive that people started to steal them.

Now, what happens if a thief in the night walks off with a pole which has been stuck in the ground? Exactly, my dear Watson – a neat round hole is left on the exact spot where *kolf* players are accustomed to competing each phase of their cross-country club and ball game.

What would you do in those circumstances?

'My goodness, Hans, the pole is not there. How shall we finish?'

'There's nothing for it, Jan, old boy, but for us to knock our rollers into the hole.'

Thus, surely, was born the putt. And with it, golf. The evidence is presumptive but overwhelming. Here we have the missing link in the chain. It explains why later paintings of the Flemish school show *kolf* being played to a hole. (The idea that golf was re-exported from Scotland was never very convincing.)

Once we take the plunge and discard the Scottish theory – and it is an emotional wrench to abandon those fanciful ideas of shepherds putting acorns into rabbit holes on the linksland of Fife – then everything else falls into place.

Quite apart from Scottish military expeditions to the Continent, there was a flourishing trade link between Edinburgh and St Andrews and the Low Countries. It would be natural for the crews to pick up the game and bring it back to their homeland.

We already know that wooden balls were exported from Holland to Scotland, and that the Dutch switched to the *sajet* ball (uncombed wool stuffed into a leather cover) before the Scots began making their featheries.

St Andrews has had tremendous mileage out of calling itself the

home of golf, but I suspect strongly that the noble city is an imposter. If I am right, the real home of golf is more likely to have been the village where a challenge match was played in the year 1296 and repeated annually for the next 430 years. That was the game which evolved into golf.

Move over, St Andrews – you are usurping the historic birthright of the village of Loenen on the Vecht.

*Golf World*, November 1975.



## Out of the Barrel

It was an old driver, although well preserved and with a good pedigree. Like most golfers I am addicted to browsing in pro shops and, in particular, in the barrel of second-hand clubs which is, or ought to be, the most important display in the room.

After all, the novice's introduction to golf starts at the barrel, so the browser of today is likely to be tomorrow's customer for an expensive quiverful of shiny, matched clubs. Apart from being more fun, it is immensely valuable to start golf with an assortment of odd clubs because the learner gets to know which types of club and grip and shaft suit him, and by the time he is ready to splurge on a matched set he has the benefit of some experience.

I suspect that most people choose sets for the wrong reasons, seduced by appearances or by the selling power of the famous professional names on the back of the heads. But at least the novice who has started with a good mixture of old clubs will have some rational basis for making his selection. Anyway, I pulled this driver out of the barrel and waggled it the way pros do, making sure for this exercise, at least, that I was using the approved Vardon grip. You never know who is looking. Besides, there is always the slim chance of being mistaken for a pro and getting a discount.

The feedback which I received from my busily waggling hands was favourable, almost to the point of a guarantee that with this weapon I could carry the cross-bunker which stands as a mocking reminder of advancing years. Of course, it would be inconvenient to lug the thing around with me and then travel back to Britain with it, but surely the eventual triumph would make it worthwhile.

The proposition seemed on a par with traipsing off to Switzerland for a monkey-gland transplant, a minor inconvenience when set against the benefits. Besides, even if the thing did not work for me – the driver, not the monkey gland – I would not be seriously out of pocket with a second-hand club. A fiver maybe? I looked at the tag tied to the shaft: \$135. Yes, one hundred and thirty-five dollars, or sixty-seven pounds fifty in what we in Britain used to call real money.

That experience set me off on a journey of exploration, in order to discover the minimum outlay possible for the beginner to equip himself for golf in America. That driver had been misleading, for although it was old it was aged in the sense that a 'black label' Bentley is old, and by no means typical of the market for second-hand equipment. I was not out for collectors' items but simply intent on picking up serviceable clubs – and these turned out to be surprisingly cheap.

American pros take old sets as trade-ins against new models, and these second-hand clubs mostly accumulate in storerooms, unwanted and unsold. Even so, the prices I was quoted were not irresistible, although doubtless I could have haggled them down a bit. Instead, I took myself off to the source of all bargains, to the temple of economical living, the local thrift store. To say that these emporia are like Oxfam shops is an injustice comparable to describing the Sahara desert as a pot bunker.

Imagine a warehouse crammed with a thousand jumble sales and you are nearer the mark. They are Aladdin's caves of mankind's unwanted, worn out, broken, obsolete trappings and they operate on the premise that one person's rubbish is another person's bargain. Usually this other person is on or below the poverty line, which is the posture I had adopted for this exercise.

Resolutely walking past an antique typewriter at £18 which I am sure the Science Museum would rank as an important historical relic, I immersed myself in a dusty heap of paraphernalia. First I sorted out a bag whose zip-fastener ran smoothly and wasn't torn or obviously disintegrating. That cost 50p and one pocket contained half a dozen golf balls which, while not exactly pristine, were good enough to cause me to hesitate to play one of them at a hole with a demanding water carry. Another 50p secured a 4-iron which I judge to be almost a virgin. The 8-iron, for another 50p, has seen service, although not enough to make it an object of scorn should I produce it at my home club. I'm not sure that I can say the same for a venerable 7-iron, but that cost only 25p.

Anyway, for the total outlay of £6 I equipped myself with a serviceable assortment of clubs, balls and bag. It would cost almost that much to hire a set for a day, more if you had to buy balls.

And so to golf. The two courses at Torrey Pines, La Jolla, are superb by municipal or any other standards and, but for a tournament, I could have played for a green fee of £2.50. A monthly ticket for an enthusiast would bring this cost down to 50p a round, with no nonsense about obligatory electric carts.



So, all in all, while many people are concerned, and rightly, about the horrendous cost of golf in America, which is threatening to limit the game at the country-club level to a wealthy minority, at the other end of the social scale it is possible to enjoy golf, and good golf at that, at rates which would not bring a wince to the face even of an Aberdonian. The only trick is to live in an area, such as San Diego, where the local authority has an enlightened golf policy.

*Observer*, January 1979

## Make Friends at Leisure

When life gets me down I am sustained by the warmth, kindness and essential goodness of my fellow man. Human nature is an unfailing source of inspiration. The other day, for example, a gentleman stopped me in the street and said, 'Pardon me, stranger, but I observe that you have a pimple on your nose which must be a considerable embarrassment and discomfort to you. This is indeed a fortunate meeting for I am able to help you and shall be privileged to do so.'

With that he let me have his very last bottle of snake oil for a giveaway \$5, assuring me that it would also transform my sex life, eliminate my inferiority complex and do wonders for my bad breath. This transaction by no means exhausted his generosity. When we parted five minutes later with an effusive handshake, I had in my pocket the deed to the Brooklyn Bridge, which this philanthropist had practically given to me for a mere \$50.

On arrival at my destination, inevitably a golf club, I walked into the professionals' shop and my eye was caught by an attractive set of new clubs. In an instant an enthusiastic young assistant was at my side.

'Aren't they beauties?'

They truly were, as I conceded. Shiny, immaculate and exuding an aura which suggested that with these weapons it would be downright difficult to play a bad shot. I said as much.

'You'd better believe it,' said the young man. 'Just look at this. These clubs are precision instruments.' He held up a club by the top of the grip between finger and thumb, with a plumb bob clamped under that selfsame thumb. 'Observe how the string falls exactly across the centre of the widest sweet spot in the business. And how about this?'

He put the club on a swingweight machine. 'Every one is exactly matched, D-1 swingweight, perfect for a fine figure of a man such as yourself. And just look at these new shafts, Supa-Dynamite-Flex, which accumulate kinetic energy and release a mule kick in the impact zone to give you an extra fifty yards every time - guaranteed.'

By now he was in full flood. 'Low profile, heel-toe balanced,



contoured sole. These clubs represent a breakthrough in the latest scientific principles, the biggest advance in golf equipment since the invention of the rubber-wound ball. No wonder the pros are shooting the lights out these days with clubs of such ultimate perfection. Makes you feel sorry for the old-timers thirty-five years ago, hacking around with their primitive implements.'

The one thing you could never call me is gullible. I delivered a short lecture expounding on the theme that thirty-five years ago Byron Nelson wielded his primitive implements with greater effect than any man in history; that consummate shotmakers, such as Harry Vardon and Bobby Jones, played with clubs that were matched in neither length nor swingweight which, being a static measure, was a useless criterion for a moving object.

Further, the expression 'sweet spot', in so far as it referred to the centre of gravity, was a point so small that it could not be measured.

The young assistant was by now selling a shirt to a portly customer but he called across the shop: 'In that case, wise guy, why do all the pros play with precision-matched sets?'

Well, I have observed, as you may so observe for yourself, that very few tournament professionals do use matched sets. Look in the typical pro bag. You might well find a George Bayer driver, a Toney Penna 3-wood, a Ping 1-iron, a Wilson pitching wedge, a Hogan sand-iron, and a Ray Cook putter. The irons mainly belong to the same family ... but what is this? Most of them have lead tape stuck on the back of the heads, casting serious doubts on the efficacy of swingweighting.

The fact is that most tournament stars tend to collect their clubs in much the same way as the players of the hickory era, searching for years to find individual clubs that look and feel just right. At this point I must add, since the advertising director is holding a Colt .45 to my temple, that if you are happy with factory-matched sets then stick with them. Buy more matched sets. Change your clubs frequently and support the industry. Preserve your faith in swingweighting and revel in the advantages of a sweet spot two inches wide.

However, may I make a suggestion to add interest to your golfing experience? Almost every professional's shop has a back room stacked with second-hand clubs, traded in against glittering new sets, and they can be bought for peanuts. Browse among them. Waggle them. Forget about collecting clubs with the same name on the back. Every once in a while you will pick up a club that feels exactly right. You will know at once that with this club, in spite of that rust mark on the hosel, you can play like a giant. It may take years but eventually you will acquire a full complement of true and faithful friends, each one with

a personality to match your own.

After all, you do not go to a party and come away with a matched set of fourteen new friends. Find your clubs the same way, through happy encounters in the least expected places and circumstances. Trust your instincts and feelings.

My own clubs are now as much a part of me as my fingers, and this indissoluble union is all a result of my not being gullible. With that thought I must leave you because I have to attend to my friends. I keep their grips tacky by giving them a light smear of snake oil.

*Golf Digest*, December 1979



## Let's Play with Ten Clubs



What is so special about the number fourteen anyway? In demonology the number seven was significant for its evil properties and fourteen, presumably, would be doubly so. It is certainly a hellish number in golf, either as the score for one hole or as the number of clubs in the bag. But why fourteen?

The number fourteen was chosen arbitrarily when the rule-makers decided to stop the absurd proliferation of clubs that the professionals were carrying. Correction: the clubs that their poor, groaning caddies were required to carry. Walter Hagen had as many as twenty-eight in his bag, and that was by no means the record. Hagen, who was paid by various clubmakers to display their wares, insisted that each club was vital for the proper playing of the game. 'Baloney,' said the rulers of golf, and in 1938 they set the limit at fourteen.

That limitation has now been in operation long enough for us to attempt a judgement on whether it has been a success. In my opinion fourteen clubs have proved to be excessive. The limit was too generous, and it has significantly failed to accomplish its purpose. One of the most important reforms the custodians of golf's essential spirit could introduce would be to lower the limit to ten clubs.

By permitting fourteen clubs the lawmakers have removed from golf one of its greatest challenges and, it follows, one of its major joys. In normal conditions a golfer armed with a quiver of fourteen specialist clubs is required to hit only one basic shot. He knows the distance and therefore the appropriate club. His only problem is to reproduce the standard stroke that he has perfected by endless repetition on the practice ground. That is modern professional golf, and it is one good reason why people are switching off their television sets by the millions.

Now, suppose the golfer did not have the appropriate club in his bag. Suppose the standard shot, using the limited equipment in his armoury, would either put him through the back of the green or leave him fifteen yards short. What would he do? Well, he would either starve or he would be forced to play the game like Harry Vardon or

Bobby Jones or Tommy Bolt or Christy O'Connor or Bobby Locke. In short, he would have to think about the shot (an element that has virtually disappeared from pro golf) and then he would have to contrive a stroke suitable for the distance and conditions.

Note well that I am not suggesting for a moment that the modern professionals are incapable of playing like this. Many of them can, and they do so from time to time when the wind blows or the ground is hard. I would just like to see them all doing it all the time, because I believe that golf is a game for artists rather than for artisans.

Of course, you and I would equally be limited to ten clubs and just think what that would mean. Many of the evils that have been spawned by the fourteen-club limit would be eliminated or reduced. There would be no need for mechanical golf carts and buggies (except for the old and infirm) because we could conveniently carry our clubs – in light bags instead of those gigantic hernia-busters. The cost of golf would be cut. Thousands of people could take up the game who are at present deterred by the expense. Play would be faster and, I insist, more enjoyable.

Aha, you say, baring your fangs and striking for my jugular, fourteen clubs is a maximum, not a minimum. There is nothing to stop anyone from using ten clubs, or fewer, and thereby bringing about this Utopia of brisk, bracing, brilliant golf. In theory that is a valid thrust, but, human nature being what it is, it would be impractical to seek a voluntary revolution along these lines.

So long as fourteen clubs are permitted, then golfers will feel that they are putting themselves at a disadvantage by carrying fewer. Results from limited-club competitions disprove the case, but that nagging doubt persists: 'Perhaps if I had been able to use fourteen clubs I could have scored even better.' No, the full force of golf legislation is needed to introduce this important reform.

Why ten? Why not nine or eleven? Well, the precise figure is negotiable. I happen to believe that ten should be the upper limit, if the full benefits of the change are to be enjoyed. To go much lower – down to seven, for instance – would be too fundamental a change and I suspect that such a limit would adversely affect the ability of the great players to reproduce their present standards of scoring.

Ten looks about right. A typical bag thus could contain a driver, fairway wood, putter, sand iron, wedge and five irons roughly equivalent to 1-3-5-7-9. Obviously some people would prefer to carry three wooden clubs and discard the 1-iron. The bag would also contain a full quota of dilemmas – whether to float a 5-iron into that short hole or hood the 7-iron and hit a forcing draw.



### *What's It All About?*

An intriguing question is whether the great players of today would retain their lofty status under a ten club limit or whether new stars would arise. Nobody knows, but I for one would dearly love to watch all the reputations go into the melting pot and see who comes to the top.

*Golf Digest*, October 1979

## Drive It 553 Yards



On my home course we have a killer hole, about 460 yards and sharply doglegged to the right around a stand of noble beech trees. The other day I was going through my regular routine in preparation to tackle the monster. This involves sucking in six deep breaths to load the system with oxygen, plus a mental wind-up based on yoga, self-hypnosis and a Zen exercise designed to persuade me that, sure, I can hit a power fade twenty yards around the corner. Just as I was about to unleash my double-hernia swing, a companion remarked, 'Remember how you always used to whip one straight over those trees with your 4-wood?'

It was a cruel reminder of advancing years. My game plan – to follow the drive with a blue-flamer fairway wood, then a middle iron and hope to chip in for my par – was shattered. That evening I slumped into a chair, tucked a vitamin pill under my tongue and sought solace from back numbers of American golf magazines from around the world. Since I had already read the articles, I concentrated on the advertisements and gradually my spirits revived. Gad, what a fool I had been. Here, under my very nose, lay the answer to declining physical powers.

A pair of socks with a miracle sole, guaranteed to add 10 yards to my drive. Shoes promising another 10 yards, thanks to a similar miracle of technology and long-lasting tungsten spikes to boot. What's a few measly bucks? I'd give my entire fortune, which consists of a few measly bucks incidentally, for an extra 20 yards.

That dream proved to be mere chicken feed. Now came the real stuff. A fancy grip promised to release the tremendous power in my legs, and drive the ball 300 yards or more. And only \$6.95. Next comes a driver with an aerodynamic design to give me an extra 10 yards. If I get one of those and fit it with a graphite shaft (guaranteed 10 per cent more distance) and my new grip, that is 300 yards plus 10 plus 10 per cent. Wow, 341 yards!

For a mere \$1.75 I can get a repair manual which will show me how to assemble this wonder club. Add my extra 20 yards for shoes and socks and I'm up to 361 yards. That is before I've even pulled on a