




THE DOWNHILL LIE

A HACKER'S RETURN TO A
RUINOUS SPORT

CARL HIAASEN

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*A Hacker's Return to a
Ruinous Sport*

Carl Hiaasen



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“There is no comfort zone in golf.”

—Tiger Woods

“If there’s one thing golf demands above all else,
it’s honesty.”

—Jack Nicklaus

“When all is said and done, style is function
and function is style.”

—Ben Hogan

“When you suck, you suck.”

—Anonymous 16-handicapper

This book has been optimized for viewing
at a monitor setting of 1024 x 768 pixels.

Preface

There are so many people to blame for this book that it's hard to know where to begin. At the top of the heap is my old buddy Joe Simmens, who got me golfing again for the first time since college. Next is Mike Lupica, who egged me on and conned me into keeping this journal, primarily for his own sick amusement.

At the Sandridge Golf Club I received deceptively promising lessons from Bob Komarinetz, an excellent instructor. Later I was inexplicably admitted to membership at the Quail Valley Golf Club, where Steve Mulvey, Kevin Given, Nate Tyler, Paul Grange, Jim Teed and many other good people declined to intervene and put an end to my misery.

It was at Quail Valley where two talented pros, Steve Archer and Mike Kotnik, spent long, valiant hours attempting to identify and repair my exotic swing flaws. The incomparable Delroy Smith caddied for many rounds, offering boundless encouragement even when it was patently futile.

My book editor, Peter Gethers, was no help at all. He insisted that I continue to write, no matter how rotten I was

Preface

playing. In fact, the only person who offered to talk me out of this project was the notorious David Feherty of CBS Sports, but he's such a whack job that I didn't take him seriously.

Many friends willfully abetted my comeback by including me in their golf outings: Bill Becker, Paul Bogaards and all the crew from the class of '70 at Plantation High—"Big Al" Simmens, Jerry Miller, Tommy McDavitt, Steve Cascone, Larry Robinson, Mike Winchester and, last but not least, my tournament partner and unlicensed sports psychologist, Michael "Leibo" Leibick.

My own family cannot dodge some culpability for this misguided enterprise. My stepson, Ryan, helped pick out my first set of clubs; my wife, Fenia, bought me an elegant putter; my older son, Scott, never once tried to change my mind about doing this book, despite many opportunities; and my younger son, Quinn, has insisted on playing the game of golf with riotous mirth.

The person who first put a 5-iron in my hands all those years ago was my father, Odel Hiasen. If he were still alive, this book would have turned out much differently—for one thing, he would have fixed my shanks by now.

Last on the list of conspirators is my loving mother, Patricia, who actually was pleased that I'd taken up golf again, and to this day believes it's been good for me.

I would never admit this, but she's been right before.

**The
Downhill
Lie**

Dawn of the Dead

In the summer of 2005, I returned to golf after a much needed layoff of thirty-two years.

Attempting a comeback in my fifties wouldn't have been so absurd if I'd been a decent player when I was young, but unfortunately that wasn't the case. At my best, I'd shown occasional flashes of competence. At my worst, I'd been a menace to all carbon-based life-forms on the golf course.

On the day I gave up golfing, I stood six-feet even, weighed a stringy 145 pounds and was in relatively sound physical shape. When I returned to the game, I was half an inch taller, twenty-one pounds heavier and nagged by the following age-related ailments:

- elevated cholesterol;
- a bone spur deep in the right rotator cuff;
- an aching right hip;
- a permanently weakened right knee, due to a badly torn medial meniscus that was scraped and repaired in February 2003 by the same orthopedic surgeon who'd once worked on a young professional

The Downhill Lie

quarterback named Dan Marino. (The doctor had assured me that my injury was no worse than Marino's, then he'd added with a hearty chuckle, "But you're also not twenty-two years old.")

Other factors besides my knee joint and HDL had changed during my long absence. When I'd abandoned golf in 1973, I had been a happily married father of a two-year-old son. When I returned to the sport in 2005, I was a happily remarried father of a five-year-old son, a fourteen-year-old stepson and a thirty-four-year-old son with three kids of his own. In other words, I was a grandpa.

Over those three busy and productive decades, a normal, well-centered person would have mellowed in the loving glow of the family hearth. Not me. I was just as restless, consumed, unreflective, fatalistic and emotionally unequipped to play golf in my fifties as I was in my teens.

What possesses a man to return in midlife to a game at which he'd never excelled in his prime, and which in fact had dealt him mostly failure, angst and exasperation?

Here's why I did it: I'm one sick bastard.

The Last Waltz

My first taste of golf was as a shag caddy for my father. He often practiced hitting wedges in our front yard, and I'd put on my baseball glove and play outfield.

Dad seemed genuinely happy when I finally asked to take

golf lessons. I was perhaps eleven or twelve, too young to realize that my disposition was ill-suited to a recreation that requires infinite patience and eternal optimism.

The club pro was Harold Perry, a pleasant fellow and a solid teacher. He said I had a natural swing, which, I've since learned, is what pros always say at your first lesson. It's more merciful than: "You'd have a brighter future chopping cane."

The early sessions did seem to go well, and Harold was encouraging. As time passed, however, he began chain-smoking heavily during our lessons, which suggested to me the existence of a chronic problem for which Harold had no solution. The problem was largely in my head, and fell under the clinical heading of Wildly Unrealistic Expectations.

My first major mistake was prematurely asking to join my father for nine holes, a brisk Sunday outing during which I unraveled like a crackhead at a Billy Graham crusade. This was because I'd foolishly expected to advance the golf ball down the fairway in a linear path. The experience was marred by angry tears, muffled profanities and long, brittle periods of silence. Worse, a pattern was established that would continue throughout the years that Dad and I played together.

Golfers like maxims, and here's a good one: Beginners should never be paired with good players, especially if the good player is one's own father.

The harder I tried, the uglier it got. To say that I didn't bear my pain stoically is an understatement. Dad suffered along with me and so did his golf game, which added to my sullen mood an oppressive layer of guilt.

There were rare sunbursts of hope when I managed to hit a decent shot or sink a putt, but usually a pall of Nordic gloom followed us around the links. My father was a saint for tolerat-

The Downhill Lie

ing my tantrums and sulking. He never once ditched me; whenever I asked to tag along on his regular weekend game, he'd say yes despite knowing what histrionics lay ahead. As I grew taller he generously bought me a set of Ben Hogans, which were so gorgeous that at first I was reluctant to throw them.

Interestingly, I have no recollection of my father and me completing a round of golf, with the exception of a father-son charity event (and the only reason I didn't flee on the back nine was that I wasn't sure how to get back to the clubhouse). I can't recall our final score, probably for the same reason that victims of serious traffic accidents often cannot remember getting in the car. Trauma wipes clean the memory banks.

In high school some of my friends took up golf, and occasionally I joined them on weekends. Surrounded by retirement developments, the Lauderdale Lakes course was a scraggly, unkempt layout that was chosen by us for its dirt-cheap, all-day green fees. Despite the trampled fairways and corrugated greens, I actually started enjoying myself—the mood was loose and raunchy, and it was uplifting to discover that my friends stroked the ball as erratically as I did. We were the youngest players on that course by half a century, a disparity that every round precipitated one or two prickly confrontations with foursomes who were less agile and alert. That, of course, only added to the sportive atmosphere.

Occasionally we also played a chaotic par-3 layout, upon which I once bladed a 9-iron dead into the cup for an ace. It was a feat that I never replicated. My name (misspelled, naturally) was etched into a hokey hole-in-one plaque that was hung among literally hundreds of others in the funky little clubhouse.

My father was undoubtedly relieved that I'd found other golfing companions, freeing him to resume his regular Sunday rounds in peace. Unfortunately, bursitis was making it increasingly difficult for him to swing a club, and by the time I left for college he was playing infrequently, and in pain.

During my first semester at Emory University I got married and soon thereafter became a father, so for a time I was too preoccupied—and too broke—for golf.

In the summer of 1972 I entered the journalism college at the University of Florida in Gainesville, where I reconnected with my high school buddies. The university maintains a top-notch par-72 that was in those days open to students for \$2.50. It was there I broke 90 for the first and only time before giving up the game.

I was walking eighteen in a group that included a good friend, Al Simmens. He was hitting the ball well but I was all over the map, scrambling for bogeys and doubles. In the midst of butchering a long par-4, I improbably holed out a full 7-iron for a birdie. Exclamations of amused wonder arose from Big Al and the others. Then, supernaturally, two holes later I knocked in a 9-iron from about 110 yards.

This time Al keeled over as if felled by a sniper. Once before I'd seen him collapse like that on a golf course. It had happened when he was kneecapped by a drive struck by Larry Robinson, a member of our own foursome—the most astoundingly bad tee shot that I've ever witnessed, to this day. Al had been next up, standing dead even with Larry and seemingly safe, when Larry's abominably mishit ball shot off the tee at a 90 degree angle and smashed into Al's right leg. The impact sounded like a Willie McCovey home run. Incredibly, Al was upright within minutes, and resumed playing with only a slight limp.

The Downhill Lie

But after my second hole-out on that morning in Gainesville, he lay lifeless in the fairway with a glassy expression that called to mind Queequeg, the Pacific Island cannibal in *Moby-Dick*, who'd lapsed into a grave trance upon seeing his fate in a throw of the bones. Eventually Al arose and rejoined our group, but he was rocky.

I completed the round with no further heroics yet I walked off the 18th green with an 88, my best score ever. That was in the summer of 1973, and by the end of the year I was done. The Hogans sat in a closet, gathering dust.

Richard Nixon was hunkered down like a meth-crazed badger in the White House, Hank Aaron was one dinger shy of Babe Ruth's all-time home run record, and The Who had just released *Quadrophenia*.

At age twenty, I was more or less at peace.

Toad Golf

My divorce from golf was uncomplicated and amicable. When I came home from college on visits, my father and I would spend Sunday afternoons watching the PGA on television. Dad had always asserted that Sam Snead was the greatest player of all time, but he was gradually coming around to the possibility that Jack Nicklaus was something special.

Then, in February 1976, my father died suddenly at the outrageously unfair age of fifty, a tragedy that extinguished any lingering whim I might have had to tackle golf again with seri-

ous intent. Apparently I played a round later that year with a friend, although my memory of it is fogged.

Possibly I've blocked out other rounds, too. My brother, Rob, says that he and I golfed together one time not long after Dad passed away. "It wasn't good," he tells me.

The next time I recall swinging a club wasn't in any conventional, or socially acceptable, format.

It occurred one night that same year, when my best friend and fishing companion, Bob Branham, called to report a disturbing infestation. The culprit was *Bufo marinus*, a large and brazen type of toad that had invaded South Florida from Central America and proliferated rapidly, all but exterminating the more docile native species. The *Bufo* grows to two pounds and eats anything that fits in its maw, including small birds and mice. When threatened, it excretes from two glands behind its eyes a milky toxin extremely dangerous to mammals. Adventurous human substance abusers have claimed that licking *Bufo* toads produces psychedelic visions, but the practice is often fatal for dogs and cats.

Which is why Bob had called. Every evening a brigade of *Bufos* had been appearing outside his back door and gobbling all the food he'd put out for Dixie, his young Labrador retriever. It's probably unnecessary to point out that while Labradors possess a cheery and endearing temperament, they are not Mensa candidates in the kingdom of canines. In fact, Labs will eagerly eat, lick or gnaw objects far more disgusting than a sweaty toad. For that reason, Bob expressed what I felt was a well-founded fear that his beloved pet was in peril during these nightly *Bufo* encounters.

When I arrived at his house, the onslaught was in progress. A herd of medium-sized toads hungrily patrolled the perime-

The Downhill Lie

ter of his patio, while one exceptionally rotund specimen had vaulted into Dixie's dish and engulfed so much dog chow that it was unable to climb out. It looked like a mud quiche with eyeballs.

As kids, Bob and I had roamed the Everglades collecting wild critters, so neither of us wanted to harm the *Bufos*. Yet there seemed no choice but to remove them quickly and by force, before his dopey dog slurped one like a Popsicle.

Ballasted with Alpo, the toads would have been easy to capture by hand. That, however, would have presented two serious problems. One was the poison; the other was pee. Toads are prodigious pissers, and *Bufos* in particular own hair-trigger bladders. The instant you pick one up, the hosing commences and does not cease until you drop it.

Bob and I were discussing our limited and unsavory options when I noticed a golf bag in a corner near the back door. We had a brief conversation about which of his neighbors was the most obnoxious, and then I reached for a 9-iron. Bob chose a 7.

Before the PETA rally begins, let me point out that an adult *Bufo* toad is one of God's sturdiest creatures. Bob swears he once saw one get run over by a compact car and then hop away. I have my doubts, but in any case we purposely picked lofted clubs to effect a kinder, gentler relocation.

Aerodynamically, your average toad travels through the air with substantially more drag than a golf ball. This is because golf balls are usually round, and legless. A toad won't carry as far, or roll more than once or twice when it lands. Nonetheless, I soon found the range with Bob's 9-iron, chipping several beefy *Bufos* onto a window awning two houses away. Even at that distance we could hear the feisty invaders clomping across

the flimsy aluminum before free-falling into the backyard of their new, unsuspecting hosts.

Purists probably wouldn't consider clandestine toad launching as true golf, but for accuracy's sake it must be reported that I took five or six swings with an iron that night. The next time I touched a club was in August 1977, while vacationing in Asheville, North Carolina. The trip stands out for two reasons: Elvis Presley died that week, and I got my first (and last) taste of genuine mountain moonshine. However, I was neither grief-stricken nor bombed when I accompanied a friend to a municipal driving range, which—using borrowed clubs—I chopped into wet clots of flying sod.

During self-imposed retirement I continued to follow the professional tour as a fan, and in 1978 I even attended what was then called the Jackie Gleason Inverrary Classic in Lauderhill. On the afternoon that I was in the gallery, Nicklaus ran off five consecutive birdies on his way to dusting the field. His performance was so otherworldly that it validated my decision to abandon the game; the only way I belonged on a golf course was as a spectator.

Then, in November 2002, another slip occurred, and it ultimately set me on the cart path to perdition.

Monkey Golf

The trouble began when Terry McDonell of *Sports Illustrated* asked me to write a humorous piece of fiction for the magazine's hugely popular swimsuit issue. The "research"

The Downhill Lie

would involve traveling to Barbados to observe a photo shoot featuring exotic supermodels in microscopic bikinis.

I told Terry I'd have to think about it, a hesitancy he did not often encounter when offering swimsuit-issue assignments. However, I needed time to compose a description of the project that would sound reasonable to my beautiful Greek wife, deft as she is with cutlery.

For not the first time, imagination failed me—there was no way to put “Barbados” and “supermodels” in the same sentence and sell the trip as anything but a spectacular boondoggle, a Caribbean fantasy camp for aging males.

“Bring Fenia along,” Terry suggested.

“Done.”

The magazine put us up at a well-known and preposterously expensive resort called Sandy Lane, which would later become more famous as the place where Tiger Woods got married.

My editor, Bob Roe, arrived hauling a set of golf clubs. Having journeyed to many tropical locations for previous swimsuit editions, Roe was not breathlessly fascinated with the proceedings. The only golfer in the magazine's entourage, he'd disappear each afternoon to play one of the rambling eighteen-hole layouts at Sandy Lane.

Meanwhile I was dutifully monitoring the photo sessions on the beach, taking notes and—dare I admit?—getting bored.

You're thinking: How is that possible? *Sports Illustrated's* models are the most breathtaking women in the world!

The point cannot be argued. However, fashion shoots can be as sappingly tedious as moviemaking. There were long and frequent delays for weather, lighting, makeup, hair styling,

thong alterations and even crowd control. My mission was not to chronicle the scene as a journalist but rather to troll for potentially satiric material. After a couple of days, I'd collected more than enough.

One evening at dinner, Roe and I started chatting about golf. Foolishly I mentioned that I'd played when I was young.

"Why don't you come out with me tomorrow? It'll be fun," he said.

"No, thanks."

"They've got monkeys out there," he added matter-of-factly.

"What kind of monkeys?"

Roe shrugged. "How should I know?"

I was aware that golf had changed during my three-decade abstinence, but I had no idea that prestigious courses were now being stocked with wild, free-ranging primates. Who in their right mind could pass up a day of monkey golf?

The following afternoon, Roe and I set out for Sandy Lane's Country Club course, designed by the renowned golf architect Tom Fazio. Roe assured me that the shareholders of Time Warner would be delighted to rent me a set of clubs and pay my green fees. They even kicked in for a golf glove and a sleeve of balls.

Waiting on the first tee, I was no more anxious than a cliff diver in a hurricane. My rented driver bore little resemblance to the old persimmons I'd used as a kid—the clubhead was as large as Ozzy Osbourne's liver, and made of a distractingly shiny alloy. I have no memory of that first shot, though I feel confident to report that it did not sail 260 yards down the center of the fairway.

Fortunately, Roe is a witty, easygoing guy, and after a few

The Downhill Lie

holes my nerves began to settle. For not having played in so long, I was striking the ball shockingly well. I still couldn't putt worth a damn, but I finished the front nine only 10-over-par, a respectable number considering my extended layoff.

On the back side, those eons without practice caught up. My swing disintegrated and so did my score. I began to notice that whenever I approached my ball, Roe, who stands about six-feet-five, would discreetly endeavor to align himself behind a coconut palm, or cower in a vale of dense shrubbery. At one point, our mild-mannered caddy snatched the 3-wood from my hand and declared that I was no longer allowed to touch it.

Frankly, I wasn't as dismayed by my rusty play as I was by the lack of marauding primates, and I raised with Roe the issue of false advertising. If a golf course promises monkeys, then, by God, there ought to be monkeys.

The caddy expressed authentic surprise that we hadn't encountered any of the beasts, which he described as fearless and coarse. The only species found on Barbados is an Old World vervet, the African green monkey, which arrived more than three centuries ago with slave traders from Senegal and Gambia. Today the island's simian population is estimated at five thousand to seven thousand individuals, a somewhat speculative figure given the logistical challenges of monkey census taking.

African greenies aren't large—adult males grow only sixteen inches tall, and a ten-pounder would be considered a cruiserweight. But because they sometimes roam in hordes, the possibility for mayhem is omnipresent. I tried to remain upbeat while hacking my way through the last nine.

Finally, as Roe and I stood beneath a tree on the 13th tee, something rustled heavily in the branches above us.

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