INTO THE MYSTIC

At sometimes wet, sometimes windy, always heavenly Bandon Dunes, the golf gods have anointed a very head-trippy guru to be in charge of swing thoughts.

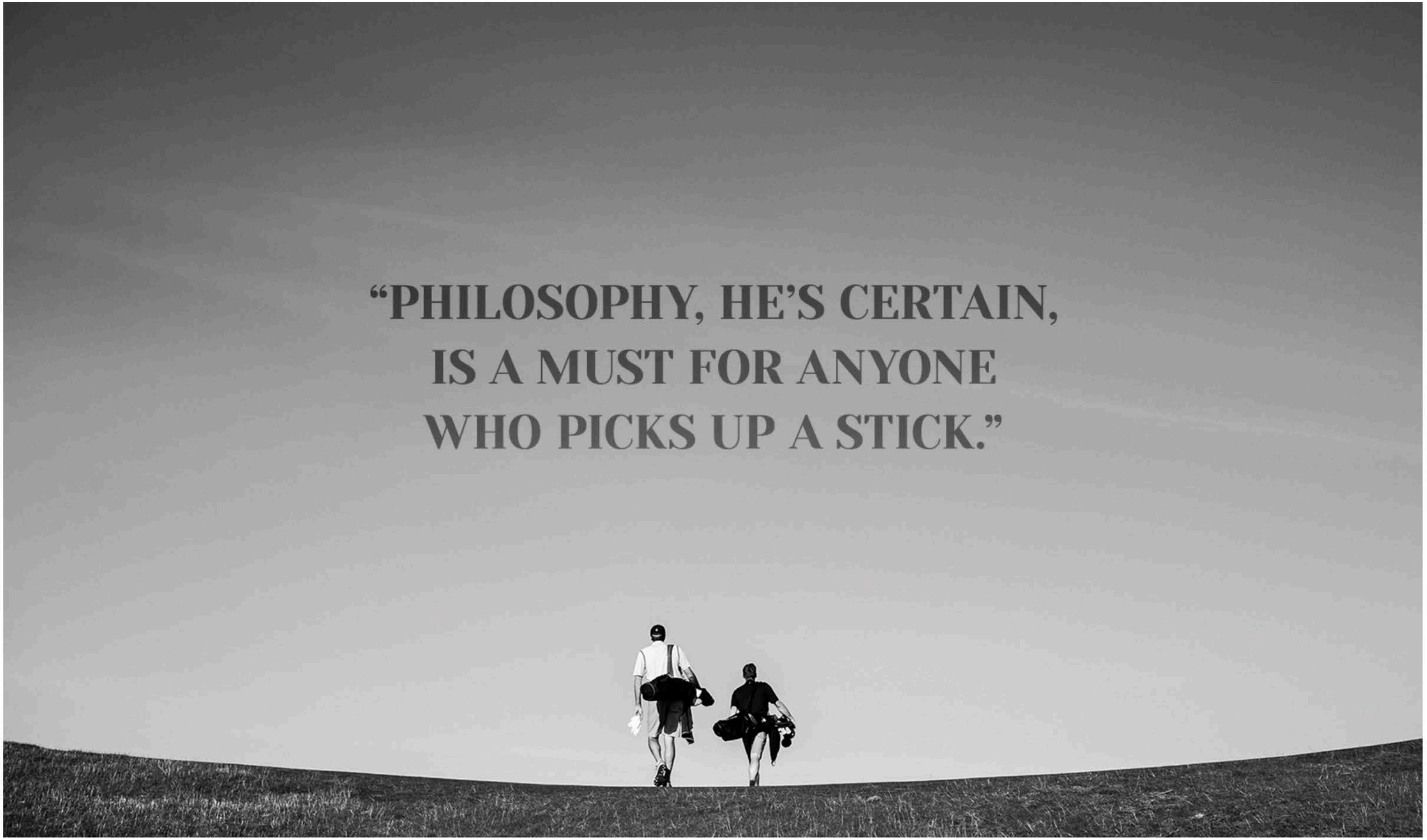
By John McAlley

"I WAS GIVING A LESSON to somebody one day and he was struggling with his putter. On the other hand, he was hitting his driver pretty well. So he said, 'Listen, this is a playing lesson, right? So when are you going to tell me something?' And I say, 'About what?' And he goes, 'About my game, you know? C'mon! Like, what am I going to do about my putting? You can see that I'm three-putting every green." And I go, 'Yeah, well, I've got a tip for you. Why don't you lose one of those tee shots?' And he goes, 'What does that even mean?!' And I say, 'If you're hitting 'em too good with your driver, that's what's fouling everything else up.' And he goes, 'You're kidding, right?' And I go, 'No, you need to knock one in the bushes or something. Hit one somewhere other than right down the middle and you'll be fine with the putter.' Finally, he hits this wild tee shot, and then immediately one-putts. So it's kinda like, if one's too good it affects the other one."

THIS IS THE GUY I'M GETTING A LESSON FROM TODAY? On a cold March day? In a downpour? It's not quite the frigid, gale-force torrent Grant Rogers prefers. "I love playing golf when the sea birds are walking," he says, "when they give up on flying altogether. Like, 'I'm not even gonna *attempt* it.' That's go time for me."

At the moment, gulls are in flight, but it's coming down hard enough that we're the only loons on the range of the Practice Center at the Bandon Dunes Golf Resort. Rogers, a PGA Master Professional, has been head of instruction at this southern Oregon paradise for 14 years, and in that time he has confounded, exhilarated, entranced, cracked up, hypnotized, hoodwinked, karate-chopped, and, ultimately, liberated countless golfers. Looking like a couple of rain-hammered crabbers on *Deadliest Catch*, we're trying to reel in my slice, a cut so consistent that yesterday on Old Macdonald—the newest of Bandon's four magnificent, 18-hole links-golf courses—my caddy generously took to calling it a power fade. Today, as if the mere proximity to Rogers were a curative, I can't get the thing to show up. "We're looking for the elusive slice," he deadpans. "We can't corral it if we can't find it." After 10 minutes of unbending arrows, Rogers grabs my club and inspects it. "Here's the problem," he says. "You're armed with an anti-slice driver. This club doesn't *know* how to slice. I think it needs a lesson." And just like that, Rogers tees one up and spins it into the trees.

“PHILOSOPHY, HE’S CERTAIN, IS A MUST FOR ANYONE WHO PICKS UP A STICK.”



Earlier in the session, he'd been teaching me to wield my 3-wood like a putter—this from a man who routinely wields his putter like a 3-wood, blasting balls to distances of up to 210 yards. "Here's the way to think about this," he says, with a golf hat *and* fleece cap pulled tightly over his head. "It's the difference between a car that's automatic and one that has gears. Clubs have gears, and that's a good thing, because the 14 clubs in your bag aren't enough. Learn to hit a variety of shots with each of 'em and you'll be a much more powerful golfer."

To prove it, Rogers pulls out his putter and launches balls to an elevated green 125 yards away. "Let's see if I can land one on the fly," he says, and then does so. "This one, I'll try to one-hop onto the green," and, sure enough, after a couple of tries, he sticks it. "This is the one that'll drive your opponent nuts," he says gleefully, skipping the ball across a hundred yards of saturated turf, rolling it up the face of the railroad ties fortifying the green, and putting it hole high.

Rogers's love affair with his flat stick is legendary. He likes to pat it on its head and talk to it. Of course, it talks back. "My putter really likes to play golf," Rogers says. "It's like, when you have a horse that likes to run, you let it run. Sometimes I look in my bag and I'm trying to figure out what club to hit, and my putter's going, 'I can *do* this! What are you thinking, man?! I can *do* this!'"

WARMING HIS HANDS ON A CUP OF HOT CHOCOLATE in a clubhouse with 180-degree views of the range, Rogers goes on about getting more out of each club. Keeping your arms relaxed is key, and that involves easing up your grip. "A light one means you have control," he says. "Watch a Bruce Lee movie like *Enter the Dragon*. They had to slow down some of his punches because they were too fast to catch [on film]. And if you watch them, if you look at his hand position, they're loose almost to the point of impact. He only makes a fist when he has to. When Muhammad Ali was on his game, his arms and hands were down because he understood the same principle. He used to do the rope-a-dope, and just smash you in the nose every now and then."

For such a Zen master—Rogers is regularly spoken of as a guru, a sage, a links-golf magician, Yoda himself—his stories often come to violent blows. But he's apt to wax heroic about weakling nerds (Woody Allen), shamans (Carlos Castaneda), and spiritualists (the Dalai Lama), too. It's one of his many contradictions. For example, it's safe to say there are fewer rings on a redwood than on the senior sitting across from me (Rogers won't reveal his age), but he's strikingly fit. And age-inappropriate references to Jack Black, Spinal Tap, and *Star Wars* fly from his lips with alacrity. Spend a few days with this perplexing mystic, and you'll find yourself both doubled over with laughter recalling hilariously bloody scenes from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and digging deeply to grasp the meaning of life.

Like most mentors, he's enamored of the maxim "When the student is ready the teacher appears," and he won't abide the word *can't*. "If you see a good psychiatrist," he says, "they'll always get you to substitute *don't* for *can't*."

"So…'I *don't* draw the ball for the life of me' is better than 'I *can't* draw the ball for the life of me'?" I ask.

"It is," he says, "because if you can't, you can't."

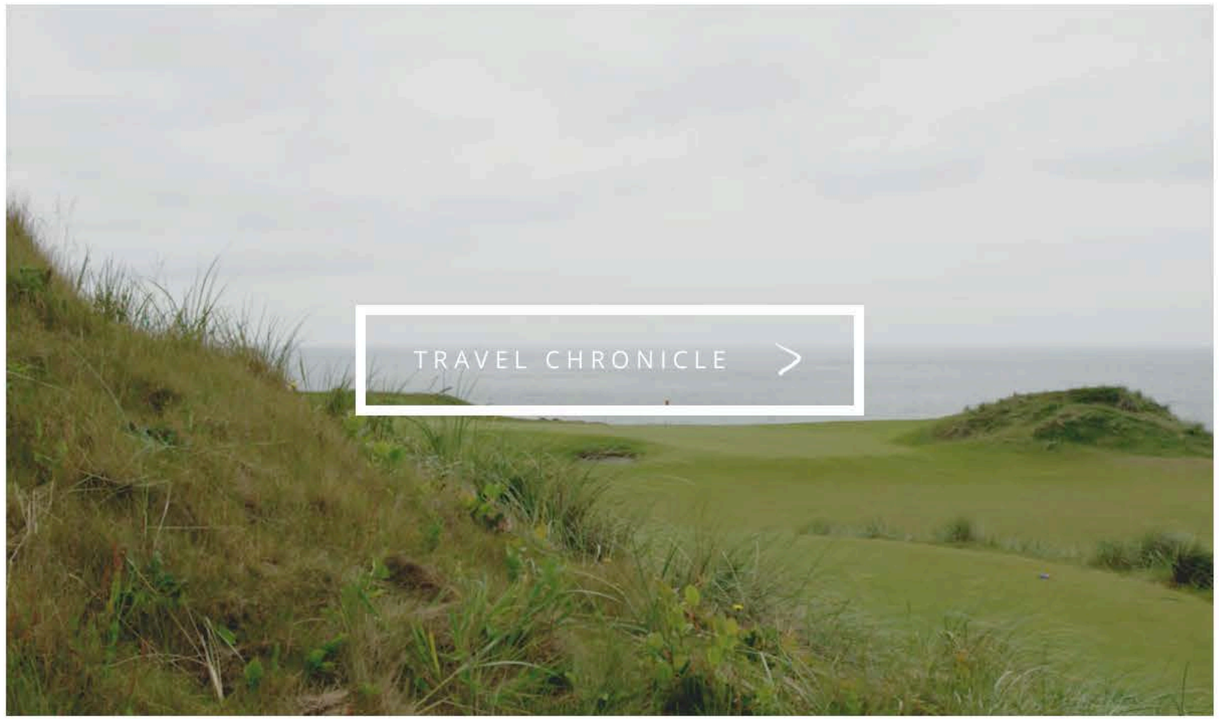
Trenton Fraser, one of Rogers's eager charges at the Practice Center, is accustomed to sitting at the wise man's knee. "Have you guys met?" Rogers asks, as Fraser, brushing drops from his rain gear, takes refuge in the clubhouse. "I taught Trenton how to play chess, and now he's definitely ready for battle."

"Yeah, I beat him a couple of times," Fraser groans, "but 90 percent of the time he terrorizes me."

"Well," Rogers says, "that other 10 percent of the time is worth it, right?"

"It is, although I feel like you throw the game. That's the way it is with the Wizard—you can never really tell if you beat him."

"But you listen to him," Fraser says to me directly, "because he's not teaching you golf, he's teaching you life."



"IS THERE A GOLF COURSE AROUND HERE?" the Wizard asks a waitress a few days later, striding into the Tufted Puffin, Bandon's central eatery, with his clubs strapped to his back. He must have a thing for feng shui, too, because he insists on sitting at a round table, not a square one.

"Okay, what's your first question?" he asks, stiffening in his seat.

"We'll start with the basics," I say. "Where were you born?"

"Okay, what's your second question?"

"What did your folks do for a living?"

"Okay, what's your third question?"

Rogers likes to talk about his past about as much as a nail likes to talk about a hammer. Don't bother asking him where he went to college. The question engenders strange guttural sounds. The first time Rogers and I met, he claimed he was from a small town in Northern California named Las Ciatas. The place doesn't exist. Discerning the fabulist from the truth-teller isn't easy with him, but that's usually the case with compulsive storytellers.

This much *seems* to be true. Like his boss, Mike Keiser, the founder and owner of Bandon Dunes, Rogers was introduced to golf by his mother—yes, in a small Northern California town. "When I was little, she gave me a putter with the words 'Have fun, play fair' etched on its shaft," he remembers, tucking into a salad. "To keep track of me, she put holes in the ground outside the kitchen window and sunk soup cans into them. I had my own little five-hole course. Years later, I found out that Seve Ballesteros's mother did the same thing."

His interest in the game took hold around age 10, when he'd idle away after-school hours with a friend. "We used to get off the bus, and before we went home, we would go to this orchard and eat apricots and grapes. At the end of the orchard was a golf course, and we'd watch guys play one hole. They'd do all kinds of crazy things. I found it really interesting to see how they reacted to their good shots and their wild ones. One of 'em got so mad he broke his club and threw it into the orchard. That became our club. They lost plenty of balls, too, so we would sneak out there and play. That's kinda how I got started: eating grapes and watching golfers."

In college, Rogers pursued his interest in psychology and philosophy, eventually fusing those two passions with a third. He uses psychology to understand and, ultimately, coax good golf from his students. Philosophy, he's certain, is a must for anyone who picks up a stick. "I think it's handy," he says in a lulling, unexpectedly flat voice for such a feverish raconteur. "You know, if it gets a little nuts out there, you can lean on it. The idea is, you can discover things playing golf—and it's pretty important. Like, sometimes it doesn't matter what par a hole is or where your ball goes; it's about the things you find along the way. Like, today, when you and I play, the cloud-watching will be really good, and the waves might be perfect for surfing. There are all sorts of things you can spy. Yeah, you'll have your favorite shots here and there, and you'll have to cope with some wild ones. That's the same every time you play." What's not the same, Rogers is saying, is what you can *see*.

"I'll tell you what," he says, draining his go-to elixir: a mix of cranberry juice and orange juice on ice. "You can ask your questions later. Let's go play golf."

“THIS GUY IS MAKING ME FEEL LIKE A GOOD GOLFER.”

JEDI MIND TRICK No. 1: THE GUY FOLLOWS YOU AROUND. On the resort’s namesake course, Bandon Dunes—the David Kidd–designed track that, like the property’s other two ocean-side 18s, sits on cliffs above the Pacific—I pipe my first tee shot. Rogers, with the nonchalance of a trained marksman playing Nerf darts, drives his ball to within a couple of feet of mine. “I figure this way we can continue our conversation,” he quips.

For the next several holes, no matter how dreadfully I hit it, he’s right there, until the first bit of magical thinking sinks in: if he’s going to dog me this way, I’ve *got* to start hitting it better. And I do.

Rogers’s shadow play serves a practical purpose, too. No matter where I put my ball on a hole, he wants to gauge my thinking about the next shot: my line, my club selection, my perception of factors like slope and wind. It also keeps him gently in my ear. “Oh, nice strike.” “Really good rhythm there.” “Let’s see your smooth swing here.” “Great putt.” “That’s it; that’s the zone you want to be in.” Not an unpleasant word is uttered. And after three seemingly effortless pars in the first four holes, I say to myself, completely involuntarily: “This guy is making me feel like a good golfer.”

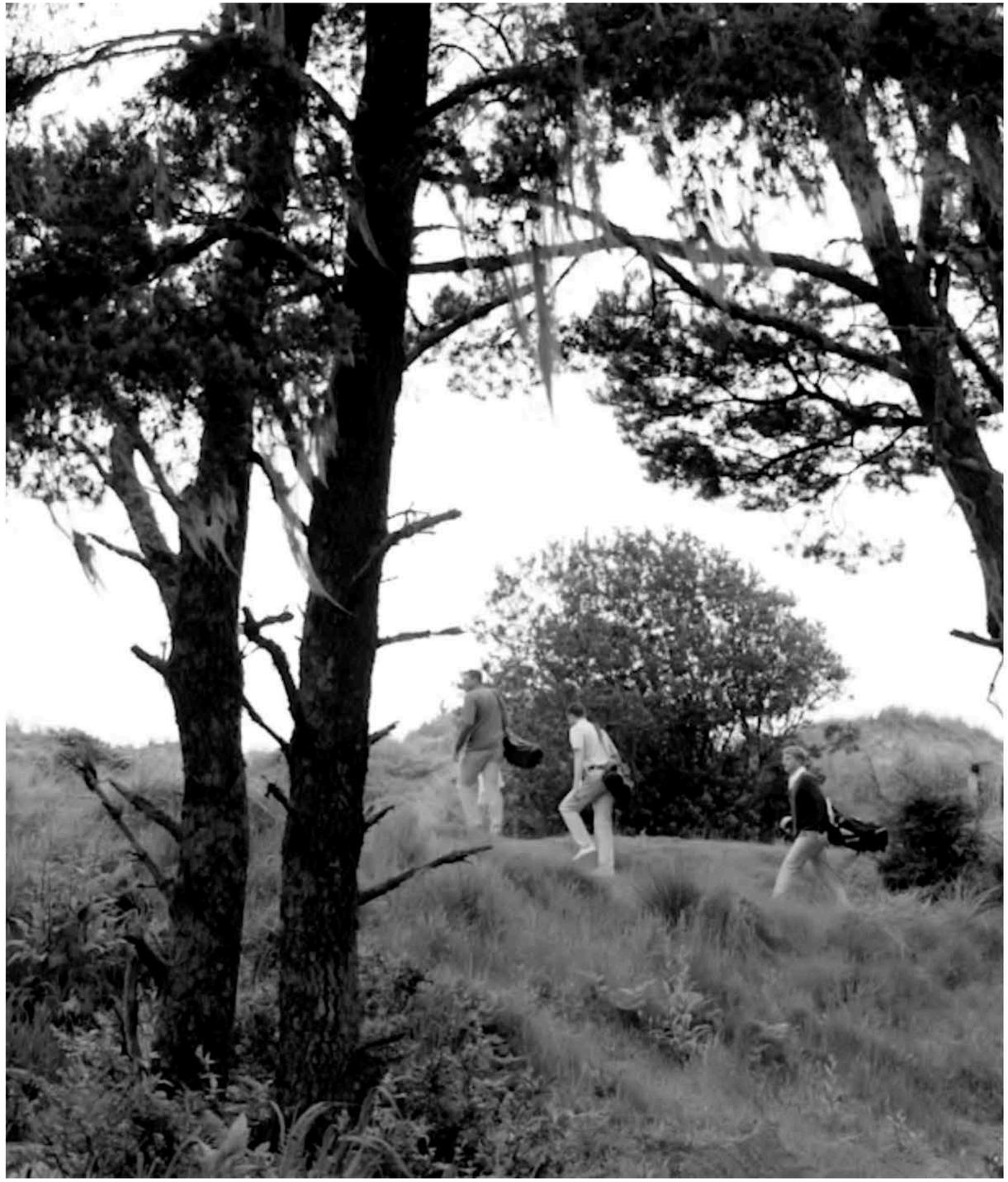
Naturally, my slice immediately reappears, and Rogers gets back in my head about the fix: releasing my hands through impact. I turn them so aggressively on my next drive that the ball rockets to the left, flying 30 yards longer than my best tee shot so far, but straight at the ocean. "*That's* it," he says excitedly.

"That's *it*?" I ask, incredulously. "I *yanked* it."

"Yeah, but you hit it solid. No slice spin. Be happy—we don't wanna rile the golf gods. Think of it this way. You're in an airport, right? And you go to Starbucks, and you get three cups of coffee. One of them is too hot and you can't drink it. One of them's too cold and you don't like it. And the other one's just right. That's kinda what you're running into here. The slice is the hot cup of coffee, the pull is a little too cold, and the next one is going to be just right. It's a question of timing your release."

Walking the course with our clubs on our backs gives Rogers time to feed me a smorgasbord of concepts he thinks are key to improving play. Among them, "As you approach each tee, identify, in your mind, the best shot you hit on the hole before, and hold on to that thought." Another: "Sometimes on a hole, all you need is one really good shot to save you. You don't have to hit everything good, just … *something* good. You should always have that attitude: 'If one goes a little wild, I can recover.'"

In building Bandon Dunes, Mike Keiser wanted to make links golf—with its roller-coaster greens and rollicking fairways—more available to America golfers in part because he believes deeply in how much fun it is to play. Rogers thinks having fun is crucial to succeeding at any sport, and he's humored by the lack of humor he sees on the course. "You have to think it's funny if a golf hole clobbers you, you know?" he says, laughing. "I mean, if you think wherever you hit the ball is funny, you'll be okay, because if you don't, you're headed for trouble, buddy. When I was a kid, my father owned a tile company, and on the weekends one of the rules was, we could go swimming, we could go golfing, or we could work for him, which was a *huge* mistake. If he caught you complaining, or saying something negative about golf, you got to work for him the next Saturday. Which meant sliding bricks in and out of a blasting-hot oven all day. So from an early age, I realized that there are a lot worse things in life than losing a golf ball or bashing one into a tree. A student the other day got real upset about a shot, and I said, 'I can tell you for sure, and you have to believe me: that golf shot is not the worst thing that's ever gonna happen to you. It just isn't. You have to calm down, you have to get a grip.' My dad never bothered explaining that to me. He was just kinda like, 'Off to the furnaces!'"



A remarkable thing happens when Rogers and I make the turn: it dawns on me that, for maybe the first time in my golfing life, I haven't experienced a single moment of grinding in my round. Between shots and fillips of instruction, we jaw about everything from *The Godfather* and Scientology to Mount Everest, the songs of George Strait, and, most hilariously to my guru, the time his wife vanished in Tanzania. It's the most blissed-out I've ever been on a golf course; to the degree that I haven't a clue what score I'm posting —and it doesn't matter one bit.

"I've been quietly racking up pars, haven't I?" I ask Rogers.

"You have," he says, with the faintest trace of self-satisfaction.

On the 553-yard, par-5 13th, Rogers's beloved putter starts yelping, "I can *do* this!" And after scorching his drive, Rogers gives in to the guy. "All right, I'm going to four-putt this hole," he says, pulling the flat stick from his bag. From 300 out, he sails his first putt 180 yards. From 120 out, he knocks the ball to 25 feet. Two putts later and he's home in five.

"They've been spotting whales out there," Rogers says, eyeing the Pacific from the elevated tee of the course's astonishing 16th hole. "I have a guy that comes out here regularly with me. We go through intense golf training. I'm talking level-four stuff here. And the number one thing he goes on about is seeing those whales. I'm *serious*. But what a beautiful day we've got here. Great weather. We've kept things nice and easy. I think you're in a good headspace. You're really on your game."

As if to test it, Rogers resurrects his Jedi mind trick on the green of the epic finishing hole. After a couple of long strikes, I'm looking at an uphill, 20-foot birdie putt. Shadowing me, he knocks his approach 12 inches inside mine.

"What are you thinking here?" he asks, scanning the green.

"One ball outside right," I say.

"If you aim right, it's going to keep going right," he counters. "I'd say inside cup left."

I stroke the ball—right, of course—and it stays right.

"Now, hit mine," he says.

"You want me to hit your putt?"

"We're a team. You've been saving us all day. Knock it in for our birdie."

And it drops like a hot potato.

"SO LET ME SEE THESE QUESTIONS OF YOURS," Rogers says, taking the notes from my hand. We're back at the Tufted Puffin, enjoying a post-round drink.

"Hmm, 'What were you like as a kid?'" he says, reading from the page. "That's a good one." He sits silently for nearly a minute before continuing. "I'd like to ponder that. It's a really good question, though.

"'Does life seem long or short to you?'" he reads aloud. "Both, I think. When in doubt, pick letter D."

"How about this?" I propose. "Since you're so uncomfortable, why don't you ask me any of the questions I'm asking you? It's only fair."

"*Okay*," Rogers grins mischievously, brightening to the game. "'Are you a person of faith?'"

"In the conventional sense, no."

"Well, *I* definitely am," he says. "That's a great question. I definitely am a person of faith. I truly believe that my next shot is going to be better than my last one." We both start cracking up. "That makes me one of the most religious golfers *ever*."

After Rogers warns me one last time about testing the golf gods with my grousing about the anti-slice, he asks if I've been to the Labyrinth yet.

"I have not," I tell him.

"I think it's time to go," he says. "Now."

LABYRINTH IS DEFINED THIS WAY: “A complicated irregular network of passages or paths in which it is difficult to find one's way; a maze.” Metaphorically, it represents our journey through life, and the often confusing, often exhausting path to the discovery of our inner selves. The most famous labyrinth in the world was laid into the floor of France’s Chartres Cathedral in the 13th century. In memory of one of Mike Keiser’s closest allies in making the dream of Bandon Dunes a reality, a gorgeous, 42-foot-wide replica of Chartres’s sacred maze was added to the property in 2008. Its location is a mystery to most visitors. But not to Grant Rogers.

We drop our clubs at guest services and, on foot, head in the opposite direction of the ocean. The resort’s inland stretches are densely wooded and, at a healthy remove from the boisterous Pacific, exquisitely quiet. I’ve been lodging on the perimeter of this forest for several days, but it never occurred to me to wander into it. I wonder how many golfers who make the long journey to Bandon would even give it a thought. Not surprisingly, Rogers considers it hallowed ground.

Without my prodding, the walk, the woods, the churchlike silence seem to unburden the guarded mystic. "I used to take lessons from Johnny Miller's teacher," he says softly as we enter the tree line and work our way along a wending trail. "He saw something in me. Some others did, too. I've certainly had people in my life who've pointed me in the right direction."

Leading me through the thicket of Douglas firs, he asks, "What do you think is the hardest shot in golf?" By now, I know better than to take the gamesman's bait, so I say nothing. "It's the one you think is the hardest."

Rogers's thoughts keep flowing: "I don't know, I think I might like to change my answer. I think life is too short. I mean, there are so many cool things about being on the planet, you know? Pretty special. We're all pretty lucky to be wandering it."

When he spots the sign that steers us into the clearing where the Labyrinth sits, Rogers says, "Ah, I detect nirvana." And it's true. The setting is astoundingly beautiful and serene. Approaching the entrance to the maze, the master yields to the student. "You'll have to be our fearless leader," he says. "But remember, no short cuts. There's only one way in and one way out." Like a couple of monks in golf gear, we navigate the circular puzzle in silence. It takes five minutes to reach the center, where we stand—almost nervously—on the edge of epiphany.

"Wow, the stillness," I whisper.

"Yeah," Rogers says. "This is a powerful place."

Maybe he's thinking of the golf gods when he adds, in all seriousness, "We're being watched. That's for sure."

I shuffle my golf shoes on the gravel beneath my feet.

"You started to get into a really good rhythm out there," Rogers says, quietly. "The balls just started taking care of themselves."

"That's all you, my friend. Thanks."

A few minutes later, Rogers reverses course in the Labyrinth, where it's been decided that I should soak in this sanctuary by myself.

Heading in the direction of the trail, he turns back and says, "I was thinking about that nice putt you made on the last hole. Don't forget our faith. You and I can be the only ones in our little religious cult. And that is, 'We will be convinced that our next shot will be better than our last.'"

"That's all the faith we need, right?" I say.

"Yeah, that's it. It's been a great adventure. Now, don't get lost in there, okay?" And with that, the Wizard is off, at large in the world again.