

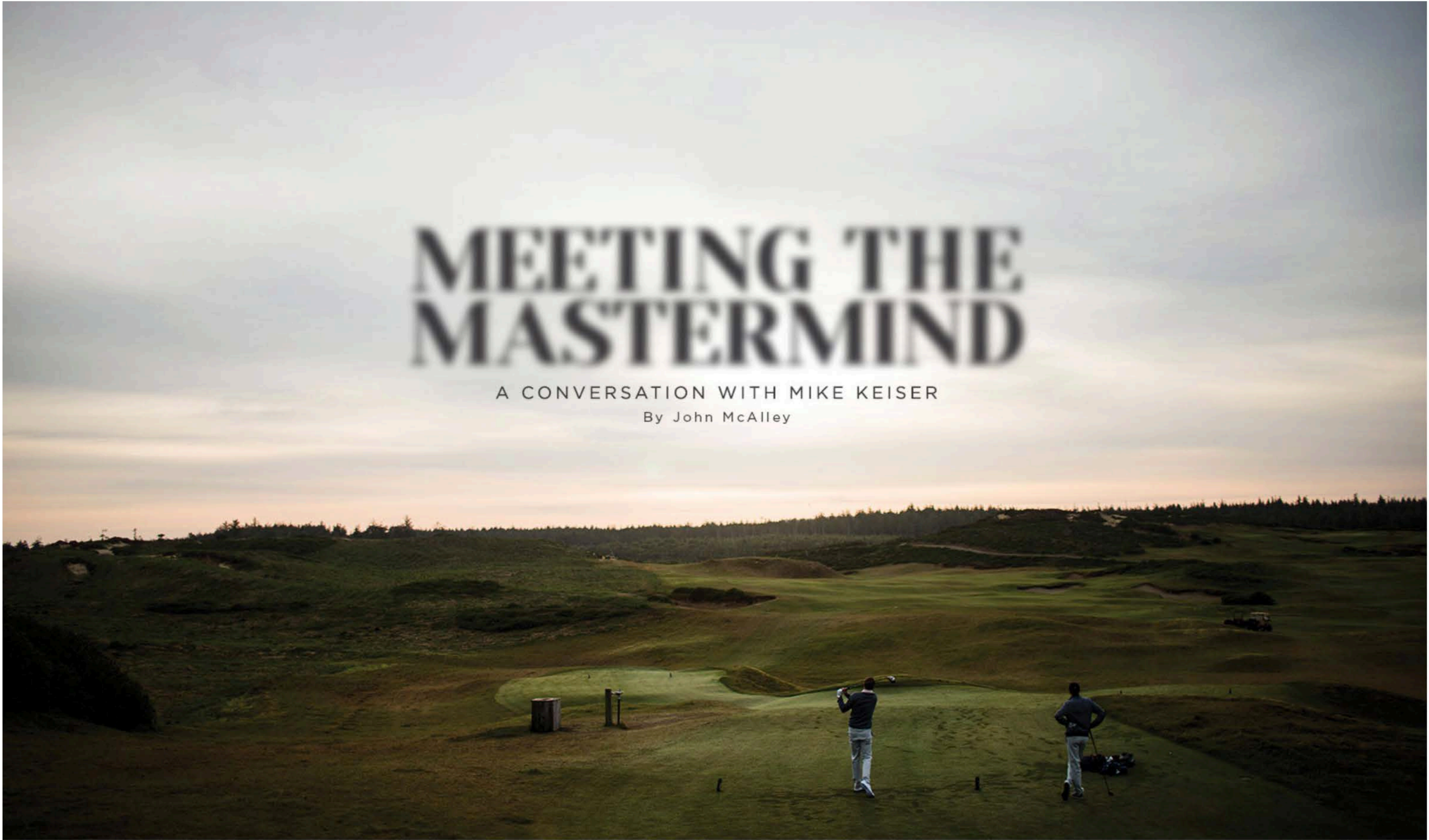


MEETING THE MASTERMIND

A CONVERSATION WITH MIKE KEISER

By John McAlley

MEETING THE MASTERMIND
BANDON





“
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-Mike Keiser





BANDON MEETING THE MASTERMIND





THERE'S NOTHING PARTICULARLY SHOWY ABOUT MIKE KEISER. In fact, for someone who has engineered two disparate but equally stunning business triumphs in his career—first as a greeting card magnate, then as the most influential person in 21st century recreational golf—his humility is uncommon. There are two keys to success, Keiser likes to tell young entrepreneurs in his typically self-effacing way: “Having the gumption to start something, and then having the good luck to find your genius, which I did here with David Kidd, Tom Doak, Bill Coore, and Ben Crenshaw, who I think are all brilliant.”

“Here” is Bandon Dunes, the resort in coastal southern Oregon that, despite its epic remoteness, has, in its comparably brief 16-year history, elbowed out august nirvanas like Pinehurst and Pebble Beach to become the most sublime and game-changing golf destination in America. Without Keiser and Bandon Dunes, there would be no Streamsong, no Chambers Bay, no Gamble Sands, no revolution in links golf in the States, and certainly no championship-level tournament played (at Tacoma’s Chambers Bay in June 2015) in the Pacific Northwest.

Bandon’s origin story is much told: Keiser takes the ample profits he earned as co-founder of the Chicago-based Recycled Paper Greetings and invests in a 1200-acre parcel of Pacific Ocean-front land four hours by car from the nearest big city (Portland). He recruits an upstart golf course designer—a kid named Kidd—and tells him to turn this rare patch of American “linksland” into a course worthy of the game’s roots in Scotland and Ireland. The track—named Bandon Dunes—opens to explosive success in 1999. Three more 18-hole courses are added to the property over the next 10 years, each one—coastal Pacific Dunes, a masterpiece by wunderkind designer Doak; Bandon Trails, an inland stunner from venerated architects Coore and Crenshaw; and Old Macdonald, a thrilling homage to C.B. Macdonald shaped lovingly by Doak and co-designer Jim Urbina—quickly ranked among the greatest public golf courses in the United States. As Bandon thrived, Keiser cast his spell across continents and distant oceans, building links beauties in Nova Scotia (Cabot Links and the new Cabot Cliffs) and Tasmania (Lost Farms and Barnbogle Dunes).





With the winter of 2014/15 ebbing and work moving forward on Sand Valley—yet another Keiser leap-of-golf-faith, in the dunes of central Wisconsin—the man recently called “the father of links golf in America” is dodging Chicago’s brutal temps in Berkeley, “where it’s cloudless and on its way to 82 degrees,” he says. The siren call of Northern California has deep resonance for Keiser, which you’d think might be lost on him if you could imagine *anything* being lost on him.



LIGHT&SHADE >

The incredibly sharp, carefully articulate, and inherently generous enterpriser is, in manner and conversation, serious and serious-minded. But listen closely between the lines and you’ll hear more Keiser chuckles than he probably expected when we booked this early-morning twosome.





You've been asked a million questions about the backstory of Bandon Dunes, but I'd like to know about your roots in the game. Is it true that your mother, not your father, introduced you to golf?

That *is* true. She grew up at the Ridgewood Country Club in New Jersey. From the age of 10 to the time she left for Wellesley College, she was a—well, not just a golfer, she played tennis as well. She was a country club athlete.

Do you distinctly remember her putting a club in your hand?

I remember her making the case that we—she and my dad—should join the East Aurora Country Club, a nine-hole mediocrity in my home town of East Aurora, New York, just southeast of Buffalo. They wanted me to participate in the club's fledgling junior golf program, which had a grand total of five young boys playing in it. That turned out to be great summer after great summer, as I would caddy and play interchangeably.





Do you have one particularly vivid or funny memory of your days as a caddy?

The vivid memory was caddying for a woman named Elizabeth Holtzclaw, who was club champion. I basically learned the good stuff about golf from watching her win match after match in her quiet, sturdy way. What a pleasure *that* was compared to the men I caddied for, the funniest of which was Buster Ramsey. He was the head coach of the Buffalo Bills, and I was excited to get the draw on Buster Ramsey's bag—before I saw Buster Ramsey's bag, which was as big as he was. He was a 350-pound tank of a man with a bag to match. I may have weighed 105 pounds at the time, and I got to lug this immense bag around, so it was a “be careful what you wish for”

thing.

You went on to play golf at Amherst, correct?

I did. I went to one of the few schools in the country where I could make the team.

And you took your passion for the game into adult life. Is it true that when you were running Recycled Paper Greetings in Chicago, you'd go jogging at lunchtime with a golf club in your hand and stop to hit a bucket of balls before returning to the office?

I did. You get a good workout *and* you hit a hundred balls.





BANDON MEETING THE MASTERMIND





Was there a range within range of your office?

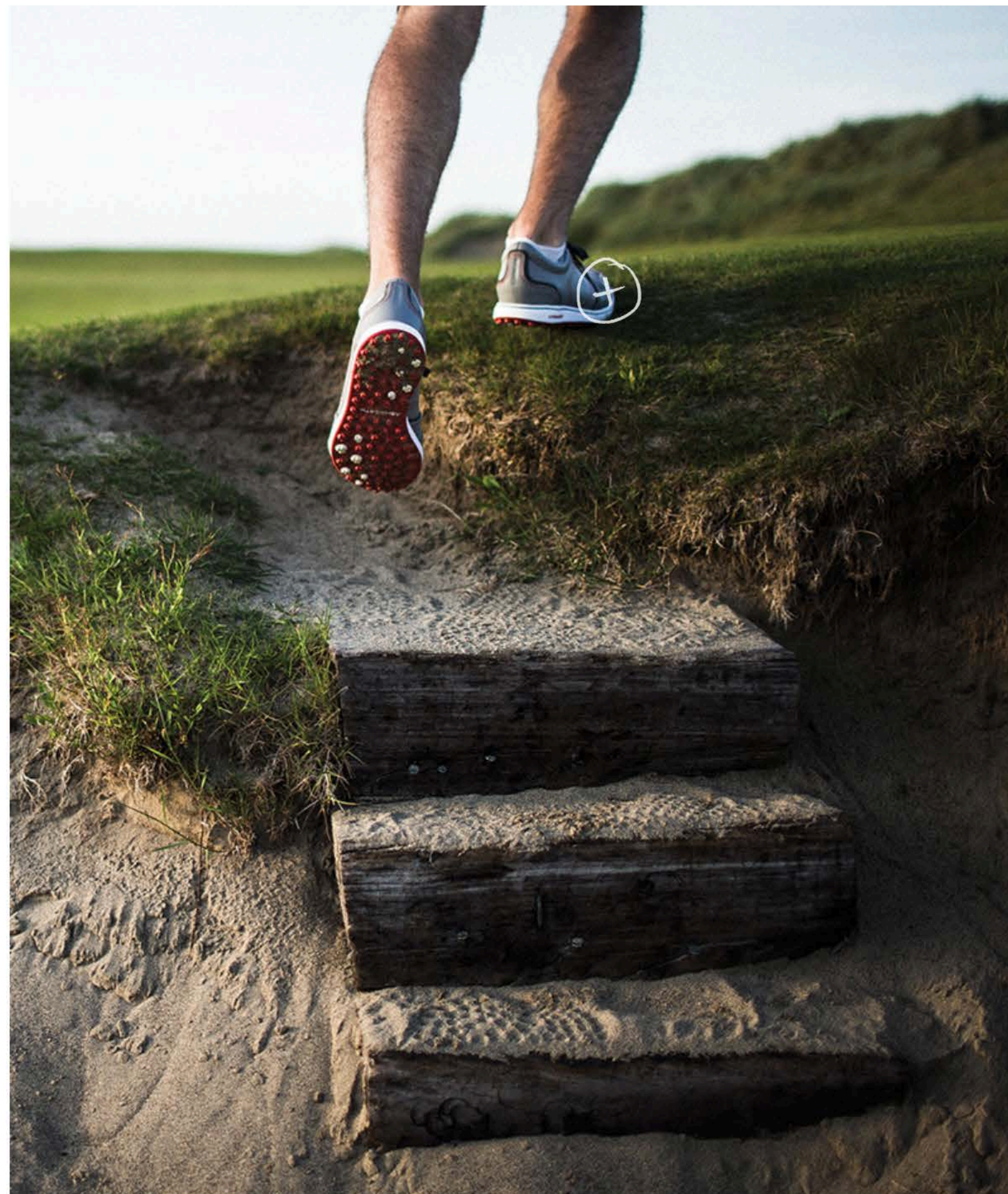
Yeah. A mile and a half away was the Diversey Driving Range, which was empty at noon. Mike Royko, the Chicago newspaper columnist, spotted me one day and wrote a critical piece about that idiot New Ager trying to combine jogging, which was hard, with golf, which was a cigar-smoking sport—and how the two just didn't fit.

Did he identify you by name?

No. But I wrote him and challenged him to a game at Butler National in nearby Oak Brook.

Were you shocked to stumble on to a piece that was actually about you?

I was! I was, "Hey, he's *dissing* me." Hence, the challenge. I knew Royko played at an inner-city golf course, and I knew from friends that he wasn't particularly good, so I felt good in challenging him. But he never responded. He got his column, that's all he needed.





You were in your 30s when you began to develop an intense interest in golf course design. You even entered the “Golf Digest” Armchair Architect contest. What do you think that submission would look like to you now?

Pretty bad. Probably embarrassing. And, frankly, if I entered the contest today it would not be a particularly strong entry by any means.

How could that be, after years of working intimately with so many phenomenal course designers?

Well, it’s one thing to know what you like, but it’s another thing to design from scratch what you’d like.

Setting aside your own courses, what are among your favorites in the States?

My favorite course is National Golf Links of America, which was designed by C.B. Macdonald. I love Pine Valley, too, but it’s too hard for most of us. Many would say National is too easy—and that’s why I think it’s excellent for retail golfers. That’s why it’s our favorite—it’s just 18 fabulous holes.





Give me a couple of others that you like in the States.

Oakmont, I think, is a golf course that, because it sort of rivals Pine Valley and Pine Valley always comes out ahead, is the most overlooked great course in America. Everyone knows about Cypress Point and Pebble Beach and Augusta. Not everyone knows about National and not everyone appreciates how good Oakmont is. Isn't it amazing that two of the top, I'll say, five courses in America were designed by amateurs: George Crump [Pine Valley] and Henry Fownes [Oakmont]? Amazing! When does that happen?



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BANDON



I know Royal Dornoch is special to you. What other courses in Scotland and Ireland speak to you?

Ballybunion was, I thought, the best in the world before I played more at Oakmont and Pine Valley and the Old Course. It's just that Ballybunion is so spectacular, with those big dunes and the way they perched greens on top of them. I think Ballybunion is exhilarating to play and Dornoch is more subtle. Those would be my top two—and, of course, the Old Course.





You don't like to rank the courses at Bandon—you love them equally, I'm sure. But would you identify for me a favorite hole on each of the four courses?

Certainly. On Bandon Dunes, it would be #5.

Why?

Well, it wasn't on the original routing from David Kidd. I didn't own the land underneath #5, a dishonest personal injury lawyer in Southern California did. But it became available when this man—I forget his name—was disbarred for cheating his clients. It caused him to go bankrupt and gave me the chance to buy his land, which I quickly gave to David Kidd for #5.

So is it the hole itself that you love or the way in which you got it?

All together.

And your favorite hole on Pacific Dunes?

#10, the first of the back-to-back par-3s.

Is that the shorter of the two?

No, it's the longer. It gets short shrift because of #11, which is so photogenic. But for that reason, I think #10—it's the underdog, and I like underdogs.





On Bandon Trails? I know it's not 14, which you've had reworked several times since the course's opening in 2005.

No, I like 14, so I *could* say that. Maybe I'll take 14 *because* it's taken such heat.

Are you happy with the hole now?

The original criticism of 14 was probably deserved. The bunker left of the green was really punitive, so if you tried to hit the green with your drive—it's a drivable par-4—you often ended up in that bunker. Not terrible, but it was tough. Once we moved the bunker more to the left, it became much fairer, I thought.

Is there some attachment to that hole as well, because that tee box is on the plateau where you got your first look at the property that would become the Bandon Dunes resort?

Yes. Shorty and Charlotte Dow, who'd been the caretakers there since the '30s and who are still going strong in their 90s, built a trail that took me, on my first visit, up to what is now the 14th tee. At that moment, I knew I had found a site for links golf.

And what was that moment like?

You know, I couldn't believe that I was looking at 1200 acres on the ocean that were for sale, that were so perfect for a Ballybunion or a Dornoch kind of golf course in America. If you'd never been to Oregon, wouldn't you find it staggering that there was this site that happened to be for sale and you're standing on it?





Let's finish our thought: the hole on Old Mac you most adore?

It's gotta be #3, the Sahara.

That's where you tee off up and over a ridge.

You go up over the ridge, and over the Ghost Tree, which some day will blow down, and that'll be a shame. But when you climb to the top of that ridge, you'll encounter a breathtaking vista: 15 golf holes spread out beneath you. It's the "Aha!" moment.

What is your favorite club in your bag?

Right now it's my 4-wood hybrid. I just played Bandon pretty much with no driver or 5-wood because I have an arthritic elbow. But I find the 4-wood to be no problem to my elbow. That's my new driver.

What kind of club is it?

It is a TaylorMade SLDR.

So you're off the tee with that? Do you also use it for the ground game?

Yeah. My caddy Aaron—this had to be the most boring caddy job ever because I would tee off with the 4-wood, hit the second shot with the 4-wood, often hit a third shot with the 4-wood. There was little judgment he could add to it. "Just give me my 4-wood."

This question bubbles up somewhat regularly: is there thought about a fifth 18-hole course attached to the resort?

I have seen four other sites on the coast of Oregon that are exciting that I don't own yet. Sorry to tease you; I can't reveal them to you. But each, in its own way, is spectacular.

Are these in the 50 miles of sand dunes directly north of the resort?

Two of them are. Two of them are south.

You were recently referred to as the father of links golf in America. Do you think that's true?

Probably not. I would say Charles Blair Macdonald was the father of American golf, because links-golf holes are what he patterned so many of his great holes after.





Do you feel enlarged by the fact that so many people admire what you've done for American golf?

I think it's good that people realize links golf is—I won't say the *only* kind of golf, but it's certainly a pleasure to play. Most golfers haven't been to Scotland and Ireland, but those who have know how great the links-golf experience is. So I think it's probably good for golf for someone to give me more credit than is deserved.



You're being typically humble.

It's the best way to be. We've been playing golf since the 15th century. I wouldn't want to take credit for much more than the courses I've built.





Why do you think links golf is now having such a strong pull on the recreational golfer?

It's fun, and it's more visually interesting than tree-lined fairways, which is what most American golf is: playing through trees. Trees are nice. I'm a tree *hugger*. But a tree is a tree is a tree. If you go to Old Macdonald and think of that vista on top of the ridge on #3, it's a much more visually beautiful landscape than looking at 300 acres of Douglas fir. I think what we're selling at Bandon Dunes is beauty and fun. Ballybunion is beauty and fun.

But the weather, sometimes, is not. How do you stay comfortable on the courses at Bandon, where the weather can range from glorious sunshine to torrential rain within the space of an hour?

I think most people who know links golf have three layers on and two layers in their bag. That's more than enough to deal with 50-degree temperatures and wind and rain. But I'm always surprised to learn how many people play golf in the rain at Bandon Dunes. I get a lot of letters saying, "We had perfect weather: it poured one morning, it was sort of cloudy for two days, and it was sunny and 80 the fourth day."

I've read that you give assistance to every Bandon, Oregon, resident who graduates from high school and wants to go on to college. True?

Whether it's 100 percent true, I can't tell you. I do know that Joseph Bain has been dealing scholarships in Bandon since well before I was there, and he and I... From the local high school, he finds out who wants to go to college and can't pay for it. We have a scholarship program that makes the difference between going to college and not going to college.





Your charitable efforts extend beyond that. Are you still donating proceeds from the resort's par-3 Bandon Preserve course?

Yes. [Recently, I presented] a \$650,000 check—last year's Preserve profits—to the Wild Rivers Coast Alliance. So that continues to be the plan: Bandon Preserve is to fund South Coast preservation and clean economic development.

You're giving away hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. Your generosity to others is remarkable. And yet, I've heard, you're schlepping around in a pre-owned Audi?

My son has now taken that over. I don't have a car.

The owner of Bandon Dunes doesn't have a car?

Nope. I'm a man without car.



Looking back, what would you say were the essential life lessons you learned from your mother and your father?

My father taught me to always leave a place better off than when you found it. A sense of stewardship was very much a part of his life. He was an Eagle Scout, and he was a Navy Cross winner in World War II. And I would say, in both those pursuits, he carried out what he taught each of his sons: always leave a place better off, which, in the case of these golf landscapes, is to leave them more beautiful and more clean than when we found them.

And from your mother?

My mother always wanted to live in Marin County, California. She was from New Jersey and was tired of the winters. And for a variety of reasons, she was forced to live her life in Buffalo, New York, the snow capital of the world. Her lesson to me was to make the best of what you have. Every winter, she'd get blizzard after blizzard after blizzard, and think to herself, *I could be in Marin County, but I'm here—and I'll just be making the best of it.*

