

Biblical Proportions

“How ‘bout the one with the guy and the whale?”

Considering the source, the inquiry was justified. RB could barely scratch the surface when it came to the Good Book. I, being raised Roman Catholic, knew only a bit more although I couldn’t claim having read it cover to cover.

“Jonah?” I replied in a surprised tone.

“Yeah, I think that was the guy.”

“Two handicap?” I countered, seeing if my buddy would take the bait.

“C’mon Haigs. Any guy that gets swallowed by a whale and lives to tell about it has to be a scratch,” RB said matter-of-factly.

I agreed -- pretty nifty reply. However I decided to end the biblical volley right then and there.

The summer of 1974 brought two junior golf prodigies (at least in our minds) to a small motel on the outskirts of Urbana, Illinois. RB and I were participants in the Illinois Insurance Youth Classic (IYC) Golf Tournament. Finish in the top four and a trip to the national finals in Rhode Island rewarded contestants.

Inside the generic room ABC, NBC and CBS offered background noise as reruns flashed across the TV. Outside our screen door we gathered bits and pieces from conversations pertaining to the day’s play. Those out of contention seemed a bit louder than those focusing on their second round. RB and I, among those in contention, realized we’d be playing early the next morning and thought better of pursuing other temptations that came in red and white 12 ounce cans.

“Find it yet?”

I flipped through the Gideon’s bible searching for whale references. You would think those folks might have granted us the courtesy of providing pictures. I kept at it, guessing Jonah probably teed it up in the Old Testament.

“Found it, RB,” I answered.

It’s a safe assumption that golf creates unique superstitions and tendencies among players. This is indeed fact. If you watch the PGA Tour closely week to week, you’d discover a few oddities from the players. While we weren’t in their class, imitation allowed us to think some day we might be. Nicklaus carried two large pom-pom headcovers on his wood clubs. So did we. All tour players were required to wear slacks. So did we. Call it style over comfort because in a midwestern summer things got pretty hot and sticky. Palmer always hitched up his pants prior to pulling off a miracle shot. Trevino wore a Band-Aid on his arm. He also pulled a rubber snake out of his bag at the 1971 US Open playoff against Jack Nicklaus. Nicklaus laughed

and asked Trevino to throw it over to him. He obliged. The media made it out to be a psyche job. Trevino went on to win. We didn't have a snake in our bags – yet.

On this summer evening the two of us looked for an edge to carry us through tomorrow's final round of the Classic. What better way to enhance our luck (and play) than a direct connection with the ultimate professional? This whale story had possibilities.

I began to read the verses to RB. He seemed to actually be listening, perhaps due to the fact he trailed me by four shots. I don't recall ever having gone to church with him but for some reason, on this night, the golfing gods must have heard our call.

"Do you think this is gonna work?" I questioned my friend.

"Can't hurt. Besides, this is the closest I'm going to get to a church for a while. Can I refer to you as *Father Haigs*?"

I agreed, figuring over the last twelve years spent chasing golf balls with RB I'd been called worse.

"How do you think Jonah was feeling after that whale gobbled him up?" RB wondered.

"Like plankton," I replied. "He probably wished he stuck to inland layouts. Obviously his luck on the seaside courses had taken an extreme turn for the worse."

I finished up with Jonah. It was still too early to drift off to sleep so I continued leafing through the pages searching for more inspiration. I arrived at the one about the beginning.

"How did He create all this stuff in just a week?" RB gestured as if he had a grasp of the timeline.

"Hey, God is the ultimate shotmaker RB. There's nothing he can't do."

"Yep, but still it takes the tour a week to play just one event. Imagine having to create heaven and earth besides?"

Cain and Abel came and went. We got worn out trying to follow the "begats". I'm surprised RB didn't ask me to look for the "giant story". We didn't have to tee it up for another ten hours so we weren't pressed for time.

Walking across the room I grabbed my putter. I wanted to try this divine intervention stuff right away. Being in a semi-religious state with my putter in hand could drastically improve my routine. My stroke felt smooth and easy. I was convinced any twenty-footer didn't stand a chance with Jonah and me gripping the putter.

"Hey RB, I think we're gonna kick that Chicago kid's butt tomorrow – you know, Mr. press boy."

I was referring to a state hotshot whose name was plastered all over the Tribune or Sun-Times whenever he blew his nose. His first round 79 had him gasping for air. I smelled blood in the water.

"Haigs you don't have to worry about anyone but yourself tomorrow – and me. What time do you tee it in the afternoon?"

I forgot about that momentarily. Perhaps my roommate was attempting to mess with my head a bit. After my morning tournament round I committed to play in a qualifying round for the Illinois State Amateur at another nearby course. I had never qualified for the state am and hoped the afternoon would offer a satisfying conclusion to a long day. RB, after playing in the morning, agreed to caddie for me in the afternoon.

"I think it's about 1:30."

"Gonna be a long day for you – 36 holes. Better dive into a lil' more Jonah."

"Nah, I'm feeling pretty good about things right now. Savoy had better watch out. I think I might kick its teeth in tomorrow."

Apparently I liked kicking things.

Played over the two University of Illinois golf courses, the IYC Tournament attracted a solid field of prominent junior players from around the state. The two 18 hole layouts were dubbed the "Orange" and "Blue". Nothing got by the Founding Fathers when they searched for appropriate names for their courses. Situated smack dab in the middle of Illinois' finest farmland, the routings offered few trees, little elevation change and the potential for windy conditions. Adjacent to the facility one could watch and hear the daily operations of the Champaign/Urbana airport. Occasionally a jet from O'Hare would buzz the course on its arrival. Augusta National this was not.

Clearly the dominant factor to contend with was the hot summer wind. It blew incessantly. Nicknamed Savoy for the small, unincorporated village across the highway, the Orange offered the tougher challenge of the two. It featured tiny, sloped putting surfaces that if missed to the sides or long prevented easy up-and-downs. It provided a fair test to those with a little local knowledge, which we possessed. Strong iron players usually fared well at the venue.

"Feels good to get the Orange out of the way, huh?" RB speculated.

I agreed.

"Hey, I told you about the crazy up-and-down I made from behind 16 didn't I?" I thought I'd bother him a little longer.

"Yes! About twenty damn times. Can't believe it but with your game nothing surprises me."

RB knew I could execute a "garbage par" from any situation.

"If we take care of the Blue tomorrow we've got a shot at some hardware plus a possible trip out East."

"That would be very cool if the two of us qualified," I fantasized.

Everything appeared to be in our favor. The Orange had treated us well. Our games seemed to be at their peak but can you really peak at seventeen? At that age your game is always on. Plus the impromptu bible study lesson generated loads of confidence going into tomorrow. How could we not qualify?

“RB, I think I’ll buff the wrenches, hit the shoes and call it a night,” I announced. Looking good always helped me play better -- no dirty clubs; no muddy spikes. I laid out tomorrow’s ensemble – yellow slacks with a blue Munsingwear shirt. That combo should align all the planets in order insuring low scores.

“What time do we get up Haigs?”

This was probably the toughest query of the night. Seventeen year olds didn’t usually get up before noon during the summer – except for golf.

“6:00?”

“Let’s go for 6:18,” I answered trying to squeeze a little more sack time out of the morning. I never liked waking up on the hour. Give me 5:52, 6:27, anything but 6:00.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be OK with that RB. A lil’ shower followed by the most important movement in golf – a solid bowel movement, should allow for low scores. Hit Mickey D’s, grab some range balls, roll the short stick and we’ll be East Coast bound!”

It sounded like a simple plan. Most players, especially me, didn’t like surprises. RB rolled with the punches better than I did. Such was his nature and it showed in his game. On the other hand, I wanted to have an idea of what lay ahead in order to play my game.

Tomorrow would involve my competing in two events. I realized the payoff for each offered great opportunities. However, the immediate matter at hand involved getting some quality sack time. This too presented a challenge since RB often talked in his sleep. At times he made about as much sense asleep as he did awake.

“These look OK, don’t they?” I looked for RB’s approval on the cleaning I’d given my shoes.

“Haigs, how many times are ya gonna clean ‘em? At 7:30 in the morning nobody is going to be checking out your boats.”

RB was attempting to settle me down. He sensed I was still a bit wound up. He was right.

My thoughts again turned to my second round tomorrow afternoon. Would I have enough shots left in the bag? Should I have RB caddying for me? How would the wind be later in the day? My brain wouldn’t shut off. Surely it would be a long, hot summer day. What could be better, I rationalized. I was playing a double-header. Hopefully I’d qualify for both events. I’d know more in twenty hours. With

wrenches buffed, shoes shined and Jonah in the bag, I crawled between the sheets. As far as I could tell there was nothing left to do.

“Need any more Jonah, RB?”

“I think I’m good Haigs. I guess we’re gonna be in for a “whale” of a day tomorrow, huh pardnar?”

“You got it bud.”

I drifted off in the summer evening dreaming of low scores and great swings.

I developed a habit of letting the alarm clock sleep in. You know the type. I’m the guy whose body clock kicks in about ten minutes prior to the wake up call. At 6:08 my eyes opened. For a brief, nonsensical moment I wanted to phone in my score. But there was significant motivation for dragging my butt out of bed – first one in the shower. RB didn’t stand a chance. He was still conversing with himself.

It would be a typical central Illinois summer day – hot and sticky with enough of a breeze to encrust your skin in a layer of dust and sweat. Upon arrival at the course we popped the trunk and gathered equipment from our locker room on wheels.

“Count your sticks RB,” I reminded him to drop his 1-iron or 4-wood. The rules dictate you can only carry 14 clubs. Once again the set makeup was influenced by tour preference. Most tour players carried a 1-iron. So did we. Well at least we had the chance to put it in our bags if needed. At times I could actually hit the club fairly well. Since the Blue course offered a bit more room, we grabbed the furniture (4-wood) and put the wrenches back in the trunk.

Every athletic venue possesses its own footprint. Golf is extra special in that regard. No two courses are alike. The sights, sounds and smells define each playing field. The rhythmic sound of spikes clicking on the blacktop, a greens mower humming its way back and forth across a putting surface, plus the whine of jet engines enveloped the Savoy layouts early in the morning. Freshly cut bluegrass filled the air with its sweet aroma. Shadows highlighted various undulations in the topography. At this hour a course unveils itself in a full array of glorious colors sprinkled in glistening dew. No other sporting arena offers such an intimate perspective for the participant. It allows every player the opportunity to interpret the environment he is about to confront.

“Get a large bucket Haigs and we’ll split it. A well-oiled machine needs little tuning.” RB obviously was suffering from a reach impediment – he didn’t want to reach in his pocket for \$3.00.

“Just so you finish one shot behind me,” I kidded.

“Remember, you haven’t played the Blue and I have,” the sleeptalker added.

That was true. I played the Orange a few times and negotiated my way around it yesterday in solid fashion. The Blue, opinion had it, played easier than the Orange.

Sometimes it's dangerous to discount a course but at this point I was open to discover what lay ahead.

"I like my chances," I yelled back to RB.

The normal warm-up routine ensued – whack a few balls to loosen up, size up the competition, finally head over to the putting green to roll a few rocks. My anxiety directed me to an area in close proximity to the first tee. I had plenty of time to get my flatstick right. Besides, RB was out before me so I wanted to watch him get his round underway. We needled each other on the putting green in between rolls while chatting with other players. I drew a good pairing, playing with a friend I had met at other junior events. This provided an extra sense of security. Both of us were pretty laid back players.

The time came to get my ball in the air.

"On the tee, Mark Hagenbach," came the starter's introduction.

When a player hears this announcement their adrenaline starts to flow like fuel through a turbocharger in a racecar. Making a smooth, controlled swing is often impossible. Players hope the path of their swing is conducive to their ball finding the fairway. That was my wish at the particular moment. I drilled it down the middle.

"Good ball," my playing partners announced.

We grabbed our bags and walked off the first tee hoping to shoot a score that would allow us to take the next step in this competition – a trip to the national finals. With RB up ahead I could monitor his play. The successful opening tee shot allowed me to get into a comfortable, confident frame of mind. I felt things would go my way. What took place the next four hours is not what I had planned.

Standing on the tee of the par five ninth hole, the opportunity to make birdie and tie the front nine course record was a reality. The hole gave me a great chance. It lacked any serious hazard while playing relatively short. Naturally I made six. Still a solid front nine left me in a position to control my own destiny. All I had to do was shoot 39 or 40 on the back nine and it would be off to Rhode Island.

Experienced players know thinking ahead while trying to shoot a score can lead to disaster. Sure, there was the time when Arnold Palmer mentioned to Pittsburgh sports writer Bob Drumm all he had to do in the final round of the 1960 US Open was shoot 65 and the title would be his. History tells us this is exactly what happened. However, I was not Arnold Palmer.

The tenth hole dealt me a bogey. No big deal I thought, trying to stay positive. I steadied myself with pars on the next two holes but doubled the thirteenth. All of a sudden I was at even par, a solid score but the oil was starting to leak out of the engine. During the final five holes pars proved to be a stern challenge but walking

off the eighteenth green my two-day total found me tied for first. I was in. So was RB.

A playoff to determine the order of finish and decide the size of trophy each competitor would receive commenced shortly after I signed my card. My mood, somewhat excited by a solid two-day score, shifted to the next task at hand. I still had state amateur qualifying. If this playoff went more than two holes I would probably miss my afternoon tee time. Be that as it may, I managed to take care of this concern with my play on the first hole. My ball ran through the green after a poorly executed third shot to the par five. All I had to do was get it up-and-down to advance to the next hole with my two other competitors. My chip left a six-foot challenge to stay alive – right in the ole “throw up zone”. I addressed the putt and rolled it over the right edge of the hole. A bogey secured my third place trophy. I looked over at RB with little expression. The other two players came up and shook hands with me. One of them, my friend and fellow competitor from the morning round had a quizzical look on his face.

“Did that bother you?” he asked.

“Did what bother me?” I replied.

“That jet that flew over when you were putting?”

For some reason right as I stroked my putt a jet came directly over us as it landed. I might have been aware of it but it had no effect on my stroke. I missed it fair and square. My tournament was over. Yet RB and I qualified for the finals. We walked back to the car ready for the afternoon.

“C’mon RB, gotta do it all over again.”

After a brief stop in the clubhouse to collect my third-place trophy and travel instructions, the two of us jogged to the car and raced to the next venue. My senses were somewhat dulled. I failed to notice how nice a day it had become. I should’ve been a bit more high-spirited but it wasn’t to be.

The afternoon round would be contested in warm temperatures but at seventeen 36 hole days weren’t a problem. Besides, I had played the course before. It was tougher than the Blue, with tighter fairways and holes linked together weaving through a residential community.

“Haigs, they’re calling you to the tee!”

I hustled after my faithful caddy. At least he’d be carrying my sticks this round. I arrived at the first tee, shook hands with my fellow competitors and grabbed a rules sheet. The starter announced my name and seconds later I unloaded a vicious duck hook that flew out of bounds. As great as my opening tee shot had been this morning, my first stroke of this round would impose a penalty. RB stood silent, his head down wishing for another result.

“Throw me a ball.”

He tossed me another Titleist and I managed to keep it on the property but in the left rough, far from position A on the par four.

“Slow down pardnar. We got a lot of holes to play,” RB shifted his focus, encouraging me to remove my head from my backside. I walked briskly chasing down my second ball. Unnerved by this dreadful start I doubled my first hole. It didn’t get any better as the round continued.

To subject you with details for the remainder of this effort would be pointless. As comfortable as I was in the morning, the afternoon round was as if I had never touched a club. Bogies, doubles and the dreaded “other” occupied the boxes on my scorecard. The two of us walked together through this tragic comedy on grass. I think I managed to hit a decent shot by the fifteenth hole. With my adrenaline spent, any swing felt lifeless. The ability to persevere was overcome by the challenges that plague players on several fronts. My mind reeled to fix errant swings. A reliable short game deserted me. I finished with 85. Needless to say I would not be a participant in the 1974 Illinois State Amateur. I could have blamed my caddy. I could have blamed Jonah. The truth was I played like whale crap.

By the time we reached the car the sun hovered above the horizon taking it’s final steps toward nightfall. Thirty-six holes had been played – eighteen good, eighteen bad. I relished the fact RB and I would be playing in a national event together. Clearly I felt like an idiot subjecting him to my ridiculous score in the afternoon. How quickly the game can turn. It happened in a little over an hour’s time. Such is the nature of the game we play.

“Hey, WE ARE GOING TO RHODE ISLAND,” RB exclaimed trying to brighten my mood.

“Yeah pal. Looks like we got that right. Thanks for the loop this afternoon. Sorry I made you chase some funny shots.”

The two of us chuckled at the futility of the afternoon. I threw my shoes in the trunk, momentarily sitting on the back bumper squinting into the July sunset. Did I just shoot 85?

“It’s been a great two days. I think Jonah would have approved,” RB recollected as he sat in the co-pilot’s seat.

“Yes sir. Hey, we even beat the paper boy from Chicago,” I remembered.

“Don’t think we’ll see our names in the Tribune or the Sun-Times though. What the heck, it’s been a long day. Let’s get outta here. Fire her up Haigs.”

Our thirty-mile venture home only took twenty minutes. I decide to inject some of my afternoon frustration into the accelerator of the Pontiac. Youthful exuberance took over as the two of sped down the interstate into the fading light. We enjoyed the previous two days, the fact we qualified for the finals of the Insurance Youth Classic and the carefree teenage lifestyle we were afforded. RB sat quietly, gazing at

cornfields as we motored westward. I think he enjoyed the ride. Jonah enjoyed the ride too.