

DOUBLE GRAVITY

Those who play golf know its nuances can overwhelm. The difficulty of the game manifests itself in everything from equipment to weather even various strains of grass. The playing field is not uniform, putting surfaces roll at different speeds while hazards come in the form of bunkers, creeks, lakes, as well as oceans.

Combine these aspects with learning how to play and you might opt for a refillable prescription of Prozac. Setup, grip, stance, takeaway, finish, balance, blah, blah, blah..... How do folks play this game for enjoyment?

Yet once one becomes familiar with a couple of these obstacles there exists another force few players know. Only the astute realize another factor is part of the equation. Doubtful that one will encounter this phenomenon in the early stages of their career, it often takes years of experience to detect this subtle demon. Most simply stumble on it by trial and error. Trust me, the starter doesn't know. Neither does the head professional or the greens superintendent. Heck, the course designer is likely unaware of this mystery. Luckily you've come upon this article. I'm providing it as a sort of public service announcement. Here I will highlight three specific examples but this phenomenon reaches all corners of the globe. The most pertinent warning I can offer is this: Beware of Double Gravity!

My first introduction to this quirk of nature began several years ago in the golden age of balata and persimmon. As a young assistant golf professional at one of Chicago's premier private country clubs, I received an invitation to captain a pro-am team in an event contested at one of the most beautiful resort courses on earth – Pebble Beach Golf Links. Looking forward to playing a "shrine", I brought my clubs and my ego to the West coast for a little competition.

Many golf aficionados know this course well due to its magnificent coastal setting. If they've played it they have encountered the magnificent color contrasts of sky blue and aquamarine enveloping a canvas of emerald fairways. Watching mega-powered CEO's duff their way around the place during the PGA Tours AT&T National Pro-Am also offers a chance to take in the televised version of paradise. Whatever the experience, golfers and non-golfers alike are very familiar with Pebble Beach.

Now to the scene of the crime -- the sixteenth hole at Pebble. This quaint par four bends mildly left to right as it runs slightly downhill towards the Pacific. Some thirty yards in front of the green a narrow depression bisects the fairway. From the spot of a well-placed tee shot it is 150 yards to the diagonally sloped putting surface. This is precisely where the difficulty begins.

Back in the day of lesser technology and muscle-back irons, I could hit a 7 iron 160 yards just as sure as the sun rises in the east. On my first encounter with this hole, from 155 yards I selected a 7 iron for my second shot. My ball landed some ten

yards short of my target. I stood there feigning disbelief. The shot mysteriously fell out of the sky after being authoritatively struck.

"I hit it great," I confirmed to my playing partners.

"Must have caught a breeze," one of them answered.

However when I looked up at the trees a mild breeze actually blew faintly behind us! How could this be? The shot was downhill, I caught it flush, my ball was relatively new, plus my golf attire rivaled any tour player. I had everything in my favor. Continuing down the fairway, I dismissed the occurrence to a swirling breeze blowing off Stillwater Cove.

Two days later I arrived at this same location after crushing my drive over the right hand bunkers. My yardage computed to 135. Normally I would pull my 9-iron but remembering the bizarre event in time when the universe turned upside down two days prior, I prudently grabbed an 8 iron. The flight of the ball arced perfectly towards its destination. I posed on my follow through knowing a birdie putt followed. Inconceivably the ball once again fell five yards short of the green in gnarly kikuyu grass. I laughed out loud.

Several years passed before I came upon this force again. I tried rationalizing the two events in my mind but failed. It was as if I experienced a Bigfoot sighting. I had seen something yet I didn't mention it to others for fear of ridicule.

In 1988 the Kohler Company of Kohler, WI decided it would be a great idea to build golf courses as a part of their highly rated hospitality business. Pete Dye, the golf course architect who many folks said was the only designer capable of building a course that could burn down, came in to route a plan on land traversing the Sheboygan River. Blackwolf Run is a marvelous facility featuring two eighteen hole courses guaranteed to raise a player's blood pressure and score. The eighteenth hole of the Meadow/Valleys Course parallels the river for 330 yards before turning east to a double green perched above the opposite river bank.

By this time the technological advancement in the game brought golf balls that flew further and wood shaped clubs manufactured from various metals powered by a rainbow of graphite shafts. On more than one instance I fired a ball from the fairway towards this double putting surface only to have it dive into a wet grave. I had done the math, accounted for the wind, picked the right club, made a capable swing but to no avail. Then one day as I stood there scratching my head once again after depositing a Titleist among the Coho, it came to me. As if the secret travelled on a ray of sunlight delivered by the ultimate scratch golfer himself it proclaimed: Double Gravity. There was no booming voice or burning bush, just an indelible message engraved into my grey matter. I thought about it for a minute. It made perfect sense.

Now fully aware of this golf conundrum I heightened my senses attempting to recognize this effect prior to it altering my shots. It was a vain measure. How would

I be able to detect such a force? The only way I would know of its existence would be by playing a shot and viewing the outcome. Several years passed before I again become a victim of the “extra weight” in Milwaukee. It happened at the venerable Milwaukee Country Club.

For those who have had the pleasure to walk its fairways, Milwaukee CC is confirmed as one of the finest layouts in the country. Prior to all of Herb’s hubbub sixty miles north in Kohler, MCC was always rated the number one course in the state. It now flies under the radar a bit which is just fine with the members. The Colt/Alison design is timeless.

The twelfth hole at MCC is a wonderful par three stretching from 130-190 yards. The tees are well back from the river so the carry is not all water, perhaps only a third of the hole’s distance. The round green, protected in front by three bunkers, is slightly raised.

I have normally played the hole from 180 yards. For me it calls for a 5 or 6 iron depending on my mood, flexibility and equipment. I’ve struck great shots that have fallen in the bunkers, the water and short of the right side of the putting surface. It’s not me. Something is going on in this “Double Gravity” vortex. Number twelve at Milwaukee has been added to my list.

During my quest chasing white balls around manicured fairways I’ve realized certain events relying on trial and error account for as much if not more than a properly fitted set of clubs. Double Gravity is an anomaly I have rarely discussed with other golfers. I reasoned it took me thirty years to stumble upon the truth, let them figure it out. They will dismiss such an occurrence to a gust of wind, a bad ball, or a less than solid strike. Now they might consider this new possibility. Double Gravity is out there – you just don’t know where and when it will bring you down.