



HERE I am sitting down to write a story about Royal Aberdeen Golf Club, where I will postulate that, during this year's Walker Cup contest, only the fittest will survive – only to discover I've been beaten to the post by none other than Charles Darwin's grandson, Bernard. Now, how is that for a coincidence? Charles Darwin, the world-famous biologist and naturalist, is top of the tree you might say in evolutionary thinking. But his grandson Bernard (1876-1961) followed a different branch; he became a golf writer. In fact, he was the first dedicated golf journalist in the game. Charles Darwin, the king of causal thinking – and his progeny chose to become a golf writer. I rest my case.

We're standing on the first tee of Royal Aberdeen Golf Club, drivers in hand. Before us is a wide expanse of links with the North Sea shimmering behind the first green. It's a wide-enough fairway, slightly downhill from an elevated tee dipping into a concealed hollow before rising to a forward-sloping green. The real trouble, however, is behind the tee box, as it is disarmingly close to Royal Aberdeen Golf Club's lounge window. And there sits a gallery of early tee-timers, cheese and cucumber sandwich-munching seniors perched on their leathery seats, scrutinising your every move. It must give them great sport. They probably have bets on where your ball will end up.

A natural

"Look at that swing, he's going to pull it and end up in the gorse." "No, he's too fast, 10 to one he'll top it." There's no option but to expose yourself to this garrulous gallery. In a stiff easterly we survived the first with tolerable double bogies before turning into the Valley of Sin, Tunnel of Love, Heaven or Hell; call it what you will, the following eight holes make up the most unaffected, unpretentious, unfathomable piece of golf terrain you are ever likely to stumble across – and worthy of all the praise and rancour that gets poured upon it. The second is a wonderful natural par five, a long carry over grassy hillocks then on through windy, winding dunes. As we marched into the valley

it became deceptively calm. I could see the wind rustling the higher whins so, for my second offering, I brought out that old Scottish stratagem, a half-choked, semi-smothered, wrist-wrenching five-iron belligerently punched into the turf, my somewhat modified version of bump and run. The ball went zipping along about waist-height like a scalded chicken before taking to the choppy fairway, skimming across the humps like a flying fish. "Hey, that worked," I shouted to my partner, somewhat surprised. In true Darwinian style, links golf is all about adapting to the environment. It will be interesting to see what the American Walker Cup players make of such



selection

Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* has been stirring the evolutionary soup for 150 years. **David J. Whyte** tackles Royal Aberdeen's Balgownie course, host to this year's Walker Cup, where he contends only the fittest will survive

exuberant links, to many of them an alien landscape.

THE FINEST STRETCH OF LINKS

However you play Royal Aberdeen's front nine, be sure to enjoy it. It is definitely one of the finest stretches of links golf in the world. As you march on through the valley there are nooks and nuances the likes of which you will rarely find on any golf course. I prefer to play Royal Aberdeen on a calm day – if there ever is such a thing – to give me a chance to take it all in. Donald Trump, the American property magnate currently building "the greatest golf course in the world" on the same dune system, love or loathe him, could well be on to something if it ends up anything like Royal Aberdeen's front nine.

AT THE TURN

I've always felt Royal Aberdeen's front nine outshone the back by a country mile. But over the past few years the difference has lessened. Aesthetically, the front knows no equals. From a playing perspective the back has come into its own. This is the run where you've got to play golf rather than simply enjoy your surroundings. It has its foibles; blind tee shots, concealed

dykes and usually a whipping wind but, whatever you think of it, this is by far the tougher half.

The 12th to the 15th have their own set of hazards; their names say it all – Blind, Dyke and Well. The concluding three holes form an excellent 4-3-4 finish. The 16th sets up to put you over the top, a blind shot off the tee, but still requiring two long accurate shots to get home. The 187-yard, par-three 17th is another outstanding example of the excellent short holes on this course. In terms of disguised difficulty, few can top Balgownie's 18th. From the tee it doesn't seem so defiant, but this is a par four set up to catch the overconfident or overtired. We had the advantage of a tailwind when we played, but we still didn't reach the green in two.

CLUBHOUSE COMFORT

Finally, back in the warmth and comfort of the clubhouse lounge, a consoling glass in hand, I could understand what Bernard Darwin was saying when he wrote that Balgownie "represented a huge gap in his golfing education". This is the epitome of links golf, top of the evolutionary tree you might say, a spontaneous piece



THE FACTS

- Enjoy a video presentation on Royal Aberdeen's Balgownie course by visiting www.Go-Golf.tv
- Royal Aberdeen Golf Club is the sixth oldest club in the world. It will host the 2011 Walker Cup on September 10 and 11.
- The US will contest the 43rd Match against Great Britain and Ireland's most talented amateurs. The Walker Cup was last contested at Merion Golf Club, Pennsylvania, in 2009. The US defeated Great Britain and Ireland 16 to 9. The Americans have now won the last three matches home and away.
- Royal Aberdeen Golf Club, Balgownie Links, Bridge of Don, Aberdeen. Phone 01224 702221 (tee reservations), 01224 702571 (clubhouse) or visit www.royalaberdeengolf.com

of golf ground that has evolved with minimum interference. Get to grips with a course like this and you will come off a better player. It's definitely a course to test the better golfer, one who can accommodate the many variable conditions this arduous links can throw at you. So, as in Darwin's theory, the better adapted you are – the better you might survive. Otherwise Royal Aberdeen might just make a monkey out of you.

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