

Magic and Magoo

**From cosmic to comic,
the author discovered
common ground between
the Shivas Iron Society
and the Goat Hills gang**

by John Garrity

There are people who actually scoff at the idea of golf as a transformational experience.
—STEVE COHEN

I cling to this theory that if Michael Jackson had ever taken up golf, he would never have felt the need to have lunch with orangutans, or even with Elizabeth Taylor.
—DAN JENKINS

“HAVE YOU ever been on a snipe hunt?” The skeptical voice, a man’s, came from somewhere ahead in the darkness.

Our guide had disappeared into the trees with his flashlight, leaving us to negotiate the root-strewn trail by following a ghostly chain of bobbing, lime-green, luminescent golf balls. My own ball, glowing in my left hand like a firefly, served as a pale beacon for the truth seekers behind me. I say *truth seekers* to distance us from the merely inebriated, a couple of whom were giggling and thrashing through the Del Monte Forest, using their five-irons to ward off aggressive trees.

Ultimately, our column straggled out of the woods onto a moonlit sward. A dozen players were already collected there, murmuring among themselves and nudging the glowing balls along the ground with their clubs. “What hole is this?” someone asked.

The spirit of Shivas Irons lived in midnight madness at Spyglass Hill (top) and at a feast in the forest.

No one knew.

“I can’t see the club head,” a man complained good-naturedly. “I can’t see my hands. To tell the truth, I can’t see why I’m here.”

He was joking. We all knew why we were there: to shape space, to open windows on the paranormal, to invite contact with unseen dimensions—and, most important, to get to the distant flagstick in fewer strokes than our mangy, scum-sucking, dog-assed opponents.

Sorry about that last part. Since my midnight round of golf at Spyglass Hill, back in August, I have played daytime golf with certain Texans—boisterous men with booming voices and large, American-made cars. These men speak a language spiced with jalapeño and redolent of tobacco; they pay their gambling debts with soggy currency.

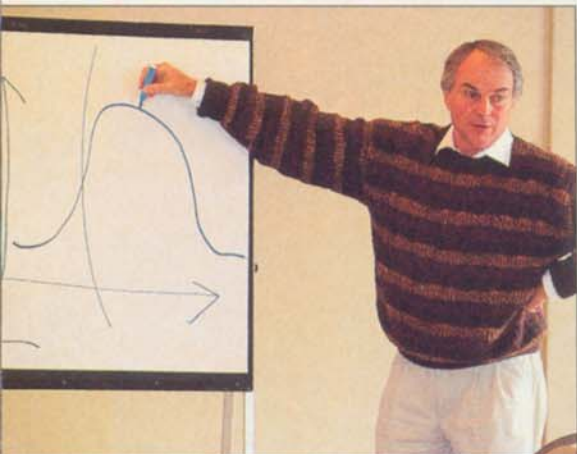
My hat’s a little tight these days because I am the only person to have played this year in the two preeminent mind-expanding events in golf: the Shivas Irons Games of the Links—a three-day, 54-hole



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spiritual ramble over the courses of California's Monterey Peninsula—and the Dan Jenkins Partnership, an 18-hole event otherwise known as A Celebration of The Goat Hills Glory Game, and this year as the Fourth Annual Meatloaf Sandwich Invitational.

The two-year-old Shivas Irons Society is a loose confederation of souls who suspect that golf is a window to metaphysical realms and paranormal experience—"a



mystery school for Republicans," in the words of writer and metaphysician Michael Murphy, whose pseudophilosophical novel *Golf in the Kingdom* is the society's bible. The Dan Jenkins Partnership, by way of contrast, is a bunch of guys who get their kicks by driving golf carts through flower beds and betting which drop of sweat will outrace another down the exposed crack of a carpenter's butt. "Thieves, gamblers and whoremongers" is Jenkins's description of his invitees, who invade Fort Worth for one day each October to play a raucous two-man scramble over the notorious muni course called Z Boaz.

The only obvious link between the two sensibilities is that each grew out of a work of literature—Murphy's 1972 novel and Jenkins's comic story *The Glory Game at Goat Hills*, first published in *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* in 1965. The former is psychobabble to some, a literary masterpiece to others; the latter, a tale about golf in Texas in the author's youth, is a hoot. The events they've spawned reflect the works, both of which command an international following of high- and low-handicap literary cultists who are quick to quote passages from memory and eager to swap swing tips and bar tabs with the respective authors.

There are differences in tone. My invi-

tation to play in the Games of the Links was printed in two colors on elegant card stock, listed an entry fee of \$2,995 for "player and guest, double occupancy" and was signed "warmest regards" by society founder and president Steve Cohen. The steep tariff went for posh accommodations, meals, entertainment and greens fees, and it included a \$600 tax-deductible contribution to the nonprofit society, which also sponsors activities around the country "to further the pleasures [of golf] and to explore its many mysteries."

My Jenkins invite, handed to me by his ownself in the press room of the PGA Championship at Southern Hills in Tulsa, was a flyer headlined MEMO TO SEMI-LIGHTWEIGHT DOGGED VICTIM DEAD SOL-

Murphy congratulated Nusbaum on his ace, which was fodder for the former's Strangeness Curve.



ID DUCK HOOKERS. "It'll cost you \$125 to play," the notice said bluntly. But it would be worth it, because "Z Boaz, carrying on the great Goat Hills tradition, has been honored again, named recently as one of America's Worst Twenty golf courses. . . . Hurry! First 120 get to play."

Who could refuse?

The first morning at the Shivas Games belonged to Fred Shoemaker. It was bleak dawn when he led some 30 of us into the fog and dew blanketing the tree-

less Links at Spanish Bay. He stopped in a fairway now and then to hit some balls and exclaim over the sea breeze about how Scottish the scene looked.

The purpose of the walk, he said, was to prepare us mentally for what might be an extraordinary day of golf. "One thing I've noticed when a person approaches the 1st tee," he began, "is that they're uncommitted to anything except looking good and not being embarrassed. It surrounds them the way air surrounds the bird and shapes the flight."

Shoemaker, a teaching pro, was preternaturally calm and spoke with the soothing mellifluousness of a suicide counselor. When a point needed illustrating, he dropped a ball onto the fescue and swatted a perfect draw down the fairway. With the same effortless swing, he changed shot shapes and trajectories, sent the ball soaring or running like a rabbit.

Clearly, he was meant to impress us the way the fictional pro from Burningbush, Shivas Irons, for whom the society is named, had impressed the narrator in *Golf in the Kingdom*. We looked at one another—each of us wearing a cap with the society logo, a flagstick planted in a green formed by the symbol for infinity—and pondered whether the game could be mastered from the mind out instead of from the body in, or whether mastery was even relevant. Golf is a game, Shoemaker

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told us, "the purpose of which is to teach you something that's not in the game."

Later we played our first 18 over the Spanish Bay course. We had been encouraged to divide the 18 holes into thirds, with six holes being played for score, six for "the centered swing," and six dedicated to "true gravity," an exalted state described in *Golf in the Kingdom*. Our subjective scores could be alphanumeric, hieroglyphic or simply cryptic. I put down the number of good shots I made on each hole, filling my scorecard with 1s and 2s (and a couple of zeros).

Nothing out of the ordinary occurred until the 6th tee, where we blundered into

Cohen tried for true gravity on the tee while Garrity (below right) just tried to maintain some balance.



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the 19th century. Actually, we were summoned down the fairway by a wildly gesticulating Scotsman in a tweed jacket and knickers, who issued us wooden baffing spoons and replica feathery balls and ordered us to tee off from the fairway, a mere 140 yards from the green.

The antique clubs called for a flat, round-the-body swing, and while the others advanced their balls about as far as they could spit, I whacked a knuckleball that flew a good hundred yards. ("My middle name is Stuart," I explained, counting on everyone to know the role that Mary, Queen of Scots, had played in the development of the game.) A pitch-and-run and a long putt later, I had 2½ feet left for a 4. "A 6 is the best of the

day," growled a burly, black-bearded galleryite in boots, kilt and embroidered vest. So advised, I made a smooth stroke and watched my feathery veer right and then sharply left before missing the cup by a good foot. "The Stuart curse!" I wailed, dropping the club.

"Aye, laddie," came a sarcastic voice. "Blame yer betters fer yer fawts at gowf!"

Amazingly, no one had spotted me as metaphysically impaired. If pressed, I would have had to confess that I had never witnessed anything remotely paranormal, on or off a golf course. This shallowness had never seemed to handicap me on the golf beat, but when we filed into the Troon Room at the Inn at Spanish Bay that afternoon, I expected—what? A seance? A fortune reading? Forty chairs were arranged in an oval; at one end was a drawing pad on an easel. "Is this your first Amway meeting?" I asked the woman on my right.

Cohen, a bearded man of substantial girth and warmth, quickly put us at ease, then turned the meeting over to Murphy—world traveler, metaphysician and cofounder of Esalen, an institute in nearby Big Sur dedicated to "transformational practice" and personal growth. Looking

younger than his 63 years, the author greeted us with a wry smile and launched into an enthusiastic discourse about "the magic, the mysticism, the occult dimensions" of golf.

"I happen to have written or channeled this book," Murphy said, "and for 22 years not a week goes by without my getting a letter about the mysterious dimensions of the game. It's convinced me that ordinary life is shot through with 'the Zohar.' In Jewish mysticism, this is the tradition that if you get something right, the Zohar, the splendor of God, manifests. The philosophers talk about it, the principles of alignment, atunement, at-oneness, atonement—*something*—but it happens. It can happen around the dinner table; it can happen in the wedding bed, making love; and apparently it really can happen a lot on the golf course."

What did he mean by *it*? Murphy responded by going to the easel and drawing a graph with one axis labeled Frequency of Report and the other, Degree of Strangeness.

"I've found it useful to talk about something called the Strangeness Curve," he said, drawing a classic bell curve, low at either end and humped up in the middle. If a phenomenon was very strange, he said while pointing to one of the low points on his curve, such as God's voice on the telephone or a car passing through a pedestrian without causing harm, one tended not to report it, fearing ridicule. But he had received hundreds of letters from golfers reporting strange phenomena—streams of light, space warps, leprechauns, levitation, psychokinesis.

Murphy had recently discussed such phenomena with Clint Eastwood, who owns the film rights to *Golf in the Kingdom*. Eastwood had been intrigued—mostly for the special-effects potential—but he had one basic question for Murphy: “What’s the book really about? What’s the central parable?”

Murphy told Eastwood, “It’s that there’s a guy named Murphy who thinks you have to go to India to an ashram to find enlightenment. And on his way he goes to a golf course in Scotland, and it’s all presented to him—what he’s looking for—on the golf course. But the poor schmuck thinks that he has to go to India. And so he leaves.”

Murphy shook his head. “I told Clint I intended the book to be a parable of missing what’s right under your nose. And Clint nodded and said, ‘That’s kind of what I thought it was about.’”

I played golf with Murphy the next morning at the Pebble Beach Golf Links. The thought struck me that the Shivas Irons Society stacked the deck in favor of the sublime by playing at Pebble instead of, say, Z Boaz, where the most notable sightings of recent years were of under-dressed damsels sunning on the back porch of New Orleans Nights, a topless joint just off the 4th fairway.

Ours was a 6:45 tee time, and Murphy was waiting by the pro shop when I arrived. He introduced me to the rest of our foursome: Steve Wille, vice president of marketing for the Pebble Beach Company, and Andy Nusbaum, the managing director of the New York Times/Sports Leisure Magazines and a member of the Shivas Irons board. “Maybe we’ll levitate,” Murphy told a photographer.

The biggest surprise, for me, was that Murphy plays golf only once or twice a year. “It’s such a sacred experience, it’s all I dare,” he joked. “I don’t keep a conventional score. I try to see how many pars and birdies I can make. I hit enough good shots that the magic is there.”

Murphy’s comment was a reminder that we were supposed to be looking for magic. At the par-3 7th the society had laid on the atmosphere. A fiddler and flutist occupied a corner of the tee, playing the allegro section of Thomas Morley’s *When Lo’ by Break of Morning*. The tweed-coated Scot from the previous day had just arrived when Nusbaum, our best player, launched a soft, high wedge from the precipice. The ball rose against the gray sky, fell like an artist’s brush stroke, hit the green a few feet short of the flagstick and rolled into the hole.

We levitated.

And yelled. The musicians looked up from their music, baffled. Up and down the shoreline, heads turned toward our promontory. "Laddie!" the bogus Scotsman shouted, rushing up to embrace Nusbaum. Murphy was almost dumbstruck. "I've never seen one!" he blurted. "I've never seen one!"

Nusbaum's ace gave our foursome scores of 1, 2, 3 and 4 on the hole—a scale. "Numerology is the bargain basement of the sciences, a notch below astrology," Murphy said at that afternoon's seminar. "Nevertheless, there is this peculiar play of numbers that Jung called 'synchronicity.'"

A comical gleam lit his eyes when he said, "Nevertheless. . . ." When I mentioned it to him later, Murphy said, "That's it, that's the way I am. Obviously, a lot of this stuff is just silly, but . . . but!" He laughed at the emphasis. "But there's this realm of the mystical that intervenes in our lives, and I've gotten so many reports from sober people—lawyers, doc-

"Tempo," one of the semidrowned rats in our sixsome called out facetiously.

Closing my left eye to shut out the stinging rain, I squeezed excess water from the grip of my driver, drew the club back with a couple of discreet jerks and blasted a powerful pull hook into the tempest. So miraculous was this drive, given the conditions, that I could have led a metaphysical seminar on the spot. But of course, they don't conduct postround seminars at Z Boaz; they change shoes in the parking lot and drive somewhere for a beer.

The Dan Jenkins Partnership is a fundraiser, the profits going to sportswriter scholarships at the author's alma mater, Texas Christian University. What sets it apart from other char-

All Saints Episcopal Hospital. Magoo, the threadbare caddie who used to join Jenkins in reckless trespass upon the fairways of exclusive Colonial Country Club, is now Vance Minter, retired industrialist and former president of Colonial.

Storytelling dominates the agenda when Jenkins and his pals get together.



Decidedly unmythical Z Boaz was the setting for the Goat Hills gang, with sixsomes on every tee.

"They used to have this grass median on Camp Bowie Boulevard," Magoo said, "and one day Walter Rainwater and Don Mack and Johnny Gibson—who was Grease Repellent—and I were carrying our bags back from Z Boaz. There must have been 20,000 cars on both sides of the street. I hadn't hit a fairway all day, and that median's only about 10 yards across, but I teed up and hit one as hard as I could. And it landed right in the middle of the median, on the grass." He laughed. "If it hadn't landed on the grass, I'd still be in jail."

The thin line between respectability and outlawry was a recurring theme in these tales. Whether they were the genesis of Jenkins's novels about well-meaning rogues and adulterers, I could only guess; what was clear was the regard in which Jenkins himself was held. "He was my idol then, and he's my idol now," said Magoo. "I've never seen him in a group where he was not the center of attention. He has that magnetism."

Affection was tempered with concern. Three weeks earlier the 64-year-old Jenkins had undergone triple-bypass heart surgery at a hospital in Jacksonville. (A quadruple bypass had been scheduled,



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tors, judges, *Republicans* . . . people to be trusted. I would have to be a complete ostrich with my head in the sand to deny these things."

Three weeks later I got my own lesson in denial. Or maybe it was an experiment in sensory overload. All I know is, I was hunched over my ball on the 9th tee at Z Boaz, trying to maintain my balance in gale-force wind and torrential rain. My blown-out umbrella lay twisted in a puddle behind me; my sodden clothes clung like a plaster. A rivulet of rainwater ran off the bill of my cap.

ity scrambles is the Goat Hills imprimatur. Jenkins's story recounts the exploits of a gang of grown men and teenagers who played sprawling, low-stakes golf 40 to 50 years ago on the rock-strewn fairways of the old Worth Hills Golf Course. Many of the characters from the story—Matty, Magoo, Moron Tom, Foot the Free, Grease Repellent—return for the scramble. Matty, who in the story "had a crewcut and wore glasses" and played "tunes on his upper front teeth with his fingernails," is now Dr. Donald Mathe-son, former chief of staff at Fort Worth's

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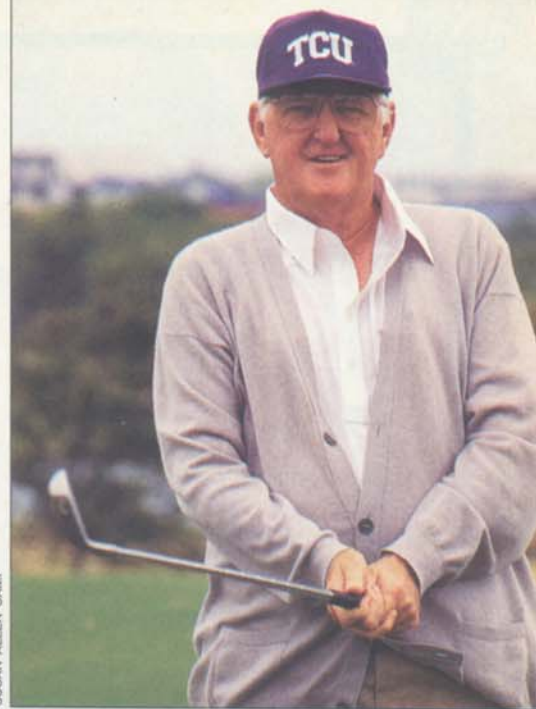
prompting Jenkins's pal Dave Marr to quip that the writer had "birdied the bypass.") That he was in Fort Worth to host the scramble surprised many; that he looked ruddy and fit was a bonus. The evening before the scramble, Jenkins's familiar deadpan countenance greeted revelers at Juanita's, the downtown Fort Worth restaurant co-owned by his wife, June. The next day he was at Z Boaz to critique the meat-loaf sandwiches and pass out trophies to the sandbaggers. He assured us he would be playing golf again in a matter of days, but he did not minimize the operation. "They try to calm you by saying the doctor does this procedure as routinely as he makes two-foot putts. And I'm thinking, Yeah, great, except this particular doctor is a dermatologist with a 28 handicap."

My scramble partner at Z Boaz was Jerry Danford, a retired television executive. Also in our sixsome were former PGA Tour player Lindy Miller and his father, Gene; *Dallas Morning News* golf writer Jeff Rude; and occasional Tour player J.C. Anderson. No one promised magic. On our very first hole, the 11th, someone asked, "Is this a shotgun start?" And Anderson, looking out at the strand of transmission shops, karate schools and fast-food joints that surrounds Z Boaz, said, "I don't think you want to fire a gun in this neighborhood." Four hours later, the wind freshened and all the water sucked up from the Gulf of Mexico over a five-day period fell on Z Boaz in one hour. The Firth of Camp Bowie, a murky pond by the 2nd green, rose dangerously.

Trying to make sense of the experience afterward, I asked several of the Goat Hills guys if they were familiar with Murphy and his novel. Most were not. But Matty—Dr. Matheson—had read it and thought it "a marvelous, marvelous story." He said, "I don't remember the exact quotation, but Murphy has this thing about 'the green of the grass, the blue of the sky, the flight of the ball.' I had occasion to read *War and Peace* not too long ago, and when Nicholas was shot on the battlefield, he woke in a daze and made some of those same allusions—the blue of the sky, and so on. I wondered if Michael Murphy was inspired by that."

I thought Matty had said, "Nicklaus was shot on the battlefield," but we quickly got that straightened out. It's all one event to me now: the Shivas Goats Games of the Meatloaf.

I plan to keep a foot in both camps. I



Three weeks after birdieing his bypass, Jenkins was at Z Boaz to dole out meat loaf and wisecracks.

have even suggested that the two organizations set up an exchange program. A foursome of Magoo, Grease Repellent, Murphy and Shoemaker could test the Strangeness Curve and inspire someone to write a new book.

The words, after all, are what matter. No one in Fort Worth got arrested; no one in Monterey reported a paranormal event. The golfers were there to wrap themselves in a beloved piece of literature and to meet the author, nothing more.

On our last night at Spanish Bay we were bused into the Del Monte Forest, where we ate, drank and sang golfing songs around portable heaters. On a makeshift stage, actors performed the pivotal McNaughton Dinner scene from *Golf in the Kingdom*. "Fascination is the true and proper mother of discipline," a flesh and blood Shivas Irons told us. "And gowf is a place to practice fascination."

Later, watching luminescent golf balls streak like shooting stars up and down the moonswept fairways of Spyglass Hill, I felt 15 years old again. In that wind, I was open to suggestion, be it from the enigmatic Irons ("Let the nothingness into your shots") or the unenigmatic Magoo ("Golf was it. Golf was life. You always went back to golf"). We played on, the voices in the dark and I—trespassers who might one day preside.

All we needed was nicknames. ■