

“Hole in One and a Half”

Travis Atkinson was good at life. His small, southern hometown was the unofficial nickname capitol of the world, so his name had been “Track” for as long as he could remember – a combination of sounds from his first and last names like a poor man’s J.Lo. He didn’t particularly like the name but accepted it because the essence of his successful approach to life was his immaculate ability to never make an issue out of something he could afford to ignore – thereby staying under the radar. He had never put this winning formula into words, but had instinctively learned to divide life’s experiences into two distinct categories. First, there were situations that simply had to be endured. By the age of thirteen, he had accepted the fact that *these* events couldn’t be changed, and he had learned to get past them with great speed and efficiency. At an age when many of his peers griped and rebelled about day-to-day hassles, he was ruthless in his knack for avoiding conflict. He could sense the approach of potential trouble, and steer clear of it like an explosives expert passing unscathed through a mine field. If an encounter threatened to be time-consuming, he made decisions based on the speediest way he could reach a conclusion. In response to his mother’s question of what he had done on a given day, his perfect time-saving response was “nothing.” Case closed. He was a good kid and an obedient son, but had never developed the ability or the desire to make small talk or to delve too deeply into the feelings associated with life’s events. Even so, great passion, resolve, and heart existed far below the surface of an inscrutable exterior.

The *other* type of experiences he identified were those things that he was able to enjoy with a mesmerized sense of focus. His life was all about getting through the unavoidable stuff in order to get to *these* moments. For now, his brand-new passion was golf. As a loner, Track loved the solitude of practicing on his own. He hit plastic balls in the back yard until the palms of his hands bled. His set of clubs was a thing of great beauty to *his* eyes only. No two clubs in his bag looked as if they could have been born from the same litter. He had still not been able to obtain a good four-iron, or a nine, but was otherwise complete from lob-wedge to three-iron. His driver was wooden, and more than double the age of Track himself. Somewhere he had found a weird-looking thing called a chipper and wondered if it even conformed to golf rules. He read and asked questions enough to be reasonably satisfied that it did, but worried that he had never seen anyone on TV using anything of the sort. He eventually put the issue to rest with the mirthful thought that he wasn’t likely to ever win anything official in the sport anyway. “If I win The Masters, maybe they won’t DQ me,” he smiled at the comical thought. This club he called

“Chip” was a flat, ugly device that could be swung like a putter, and Track eventually became deadly with it – popping accurate shots from off the green that served as consistent lags, and often scared the cup or plopped in.

There was no father in Track’s life. He had heard bits and pieces of information through the years and gathered that the man was still alive - leaving of his own accord. The boy had burst into tears in the privacy of his bedroom on a couple of occasions –thinking enviously of the storybook father/son relationships depicted on television and observed around town. But after a couple of private pity parties, he resolved that he would probably never know or understand all the reasons associated with this individual’s absence from his life, concluding that if such a man saw no reason to stick around, he would waste neither time nor energy pining away at what might have been. He was good at life, and would emphatically play every hand life dealt him. He promised himself to treat his mother with utmost kindness and respect because he assumed that she carried lots of hurt from whatever had taken place. Track had been supportive of the occasional boyfriend who came around, but saw that his mother never truly put her heart into efforts to find another life-partner. The two of them did well enough together, a mother and son sharing jobs around the house, and having fun with everyday experiences. Lots of issues were understood with no discussion necessary, such as the fact that possessions and experiences requiring lots of money were out of the question.

The only redeeming quality of the nondescript house in which they lived was its location. His home was a three-minute walk from the #4 fairway of Bending Pines Golf Club - separated by a thick wooded area. In the middle of his twelfth year, Track had tried sneaking out at dusk to play on hole #4 only. As the months passed, he gradually became bolder, and had come to believe that many of the workers and managers of the club had seen him and had chosen to ignore the trespass. As a result, his gratitude made him emphatic about not bothering any of the paying customers, and equally emphatic about treating the course itself with great care. He learned how to replace divots, fix ball marks, rake sand traps, and leave the course better than he had found it. Gradually, he became comfortable playing holes three through eight. Since one was a par three, and one was a par five, he could do the math necessary to record an 18-hole, par 72 score. He always waited until dusk, and played as long as he had a decent chance of finding the scuffed balls he used in the gathering darkness. This usually amounted to 3 or 4 holes per evening. He kept his scores and statistics in a spiral notebook and tried to estimate the monetary value of the golf he was playing, because he had promised himself to pay the club at some future point.

There was nothing remarkable about Track's physical appearance. His face was neither handsome nor ugly, but a subtle grin often made his eyes look kind and intelligent. His sandy, curly hair tended toward the shaggy side, but not in a defiant, intentional way. At age 13, he was 5'8" and 150 lbs. and would eventually gain two more inches in height and 20 more pounds in weight. If large muscles were waiting to assert themselves at some future time, they were presently lying dormant. Track did, however, show some of the fluid motion of a person who could become successful at sports in the future. He was blessed with the ability of performing tasks without appearing to put forth any effort. He had not played on organized teams but was usually *equal to or better than* most of his peers in various P.E. endeavors, performing athletic skills in a relaxed, methodical way with no wasted motion. His pre-shot routine for golf lasted less than 10 seconds and showed promising consistency and good concentration for his age. Although completely silent as he went about his business, his body language showed great enthusiasm and joy. It was as if every swing were a wonderful treat. His faded baseball cap was pulled down over his eyebrows to the point that it was hard to believe he could see out from underneath it. There was an intense, macho feel to everything he did while on the course. The fact that he was not trying to be cool made his mannerisms totally free of self-consciousness. He was "serious business".

Track's favorite hole was a 132-yard par 3. Listed as Hole #5 on the rustic oak sign near the tee box, the green was slightly uphill, and unguarded by any sand. On this particular day, #5 would have to be the last hole as the sun quickly fell below the tree line on the horizon – sending scattered daggers of light toward the pale, green grass. Today, Track's tee shot was ugly. It came off the club-face low and slicing - landing about 30 yards short of the green. If the ball had continued its original arc, it would have rolled far to the right of the green, but its first bounce was high and straight. If it had been a baseball grounder, the bounce would have been called a bad hop, but *this* bad hop sent the ball toward the green. When it disappeared from Track's sight it was looking pretty good. He jogged up the hill quickly, with clubs clanking like an army of door-to-door kitchenware salesmen. He was hoping to see the ball near the hole, but in the back of his mind realized it would be a thrill to approach the green and not see the ball. This had happened before, making him think in terms of an ace. But he had always found the ball in the rough or behind a tree. A nervous yelp escaped his throat when he saw that the ball was about an inch from the hole. He had mixed emotions about coming so close but was glad to know he'd get a birdie without the stress of a four-foot putt. Before he reached the hole, however, he had an idea.

At his age, he was not yet aware of any rules pertaining to how much time a golfer was allowed to wait for a ball to fall in the cup. He decided that if any force of nature helped the ball roll in the hole, it would be a legal hole-in-one, and he was willing to give it nine hours. At 8 pm, he left the course knowing that

he was the last golfer and probably the last worker that would see the #5 green until early the next morning. He left the ball in place and hoped for a windy night. He realized that it would be a cheap way to achieve his first eagle, but he rationalized that luck played a role in a *variety* of successful sports outcomes and rulings.

His alarm clock was set for 5 am, but he shut it off at 4:45. The fear that his mother would hear it, combined with the Christmas-morning feeling of looking forward to seeing the ball in the hole made his *subconscious* alarm sound off fifteen minutes before his Wal-Mart clock. A scribbled note on the kitchen counter provided a hasty explanation to his mother in case she discovered his absence from the house. He made it out without any significant sound. The flashlight was strong, and any fear of walking through woods in the dark was overshadowed by his great sense of anticipation. His pulse and breathing kicked into overdrive when he reached a point close enough to see that the ball was no longer where it had been. He tried to keep his hopes under control by thinking of squirrels, dogs, or any other agent that could have taken the ball away from the green. But he was there within seconds and viewing what would remain his favorite visual image for a couple of years – only to be eclipsed by an appreciation for girls which came later. He couldn't believe it, but the ball was in the hole - right where it was meant to be.

Within a day, the ball had been carefully and lovingly decorated with three different colors of Sharpie and placed in a plastic display cube originally meant to hold a baseball. Other balls from memorable rounds of golf made their way into the symmetrical cubby holes of a wooden ball-display he bought a year or so later, and each had its own specific memories and significance. But that first well-worn Pinnacle was almost always able to put a positive spin on his frame of mind as he noticed it from time to time through the years. Two important facts concerning the hole-in-one peeked out into the light of day years later.

By the 11th grade, Track was the second-best golfer on his high school team. On a rainy day, Mr. Wilkes, the golf coach, sent the team to his History classroom and began a haphazard attempt at a lecture on the rules of golf. The top five players on the team *knew* more golf, *played* more golf, and played *better* golf than he, but he wanted to show that he was earning his coaching supplement. If broken down into an hourly wage, the supplement was worth a dollar and forty-three cents an hour, but the lecture proceeded, nonetheless. The teacher had been chosen for the coaching position because he possessed a commercial driver's license which allowed him to drive the bus to golf matches out-of-town – not that he was paid a penny extra for achieving CDL status. Track and the others listened respectfully to the lecture, but all types of unrelated thoughts swirled through each mind as the coach gamely

pressed forward. The topic that caught Track's attention pertained to something Mr. Wilkes had seen on TV. A putt had come to rest on the edge of the cup. The pro who had putted the ball was penalized when he was ruled to have waited longer than the prescribed 10 seconds – hoping the ball would eventually fall into the hole. Coach Wilkes explained that a golfer is given a reasonable amount of time to go to the ball, and an additional ten seconds to wait for it to fall.

Track was stunned, as he silently went through the process of telling himself that it didn't matter. It was years ago, and he had never bragged about it anyway. It just didn't matter whether his beloved ace was or was not in accordance with official golf rules. He felt stupid for thinking about it the rest of the day, but he did. He thought back and tried to imagine that maybe the ball had plopped as soon as he turned to walk away. All day he kept trying to decide what to think of it all. He reminded himself that it was insignificant, and then told himself that he was a wimp for caring. But still it left him feeling sad, as if some wonderful myth from childhood had been exposed as a lie. It was almost as if someone had thrown away his favorite childhood toy. He thought of every outlandish plan for how he could still enjoy the memory of #5. He thought of taking a bucket of balls back to the same tee box after everyone was gone for the night. Sooner or later, he could hit a ball that would go straight in the hole. Now that the original hole-in-one was no longer valid, he wanted to quickly regain the status of being an ace golfer in his own mind. After worrying about it from time to time over the next few days, he came up with a thought that helped him dismiss the dilemma. He decided to count it as a great childhood memory and know that he got three years of enjoyment out of it even if it had not been kosher. He told himself that he would eventually hole a tee shot, and that the wait would make it all the sweeter. Finally, he decided to use it as motivation to become a better golfer. Having a low *handicap* is more valid proof that a person is a good player than to put too much pride in one lucky shot. It would be ten more years before he became aware of the second piece of information missing from his story.

By age 28 Travis Atkinson had settled into a satisfying life. He had a decent job, a tremendous wife, and two children who adored him. He had gotten a part-time job at Bending Pines during his later teen years and made sure to secretly put in an extra ten or fifteen minutes of work every week or so - keeping records until he felt that he had paid off the free golf from earlier in his life. Now he was a member and played as often as the responsibilities of his life would allow. With family duties and extra shifts at work, he often saw a month pass without any golf. He tried to get in a little extra practice every June in preparation for the tournament held for members of the club. He usually placed in the top ten and got hot enough one year to place third. The other members sometimes jokingly called him "Snow Camel" because when he had the free time to play, he played for hours at a time no matter how hot or

cold the weather happened to be. Everyone knew the story of when he fell through the ice at the edge of a pond trying to play a shot that had come to rest three feet from the bank. He would play right through lunch and forget appointments and responsibilities. His wife became friends with the groundskeeper and the workers, so that they would go out on the course and find him if he forgot to come home for an important event. He was friends with almost everyone in town and was known as the ultimate good guy.

He had played first string on a very weak high school baseball team during his junior and senior seasons and had labored as the second-string quarterback for four years. His moment of glory came in the eighth game of his senior year when the starting QB suffered a concussion and wobbled over to the other team's huddle. Track hustled onto the field and guided his team on a 73-yard drive which drained the final 7:54 off the clock. His team led by two when he came in, and the game ended with him kneeling on the ball three times on the opponent's five-yard line - still ahead by two. There were six first downs on the drive. Mostly he made safe handoffs, but also completed two short passes. The plays that die-hard fans would always remember were two runs which were 10% talent and 90% desire and heart. He kept the ball on two fourth-down plays, twisting, pushing, diving, and reaching for first downs – one of which required a measurement. The win was his team's first over their county rival in eleven years. The headlines read "TRACK ATTACKS", and the game served as a springboard for many of the good things which were now part of his life. With friendships and respect to enjoy, he made a point of eating at the Touchdown Grill at least once a week. The only hassle he had to tolerate around town was Drukkard.

Every small town seems to have one high school "superfan". For Basso Hills, it was Drukkard. Fate had been especially unkind to give Bill Drukkard that particular surname, because as his reputation for alcohol grew, the obvious transition to "Drunkard" was inevitable - although he partook far less than most people believed. He was the living, breathing personification of the old "Life's not fair," saying. His minor lisp sounded exactly like an alcohol-induced slur, and an undiagnosed inner-ear issue caused him to occasionally lose his balance as if tipsy. If he had ever been inclined to explain or defend himself, that instinct was now buried under years of subtle rejection. Most forms of open ridicule had mercifully dissipated after grade school, but the full extent of his social life consisted of conversations with men around town pertaining to various sports topics. He could rattle off facts and parrot opinions he had heard expressed on ESPN. His speech was rapid-fire as if afraid the listener would consider the conversation a waste of time, become bored, interrupt, or walk away. He had, despite these idiosyncrasies, become a likeable fixture at all types of sporting events around town – always sitting in

the same place at the stadium or in the gym, but nobody took him seriously, or fully treated him as an equal. He was “Good Ole Druk” and seen as a one-dimensional character that added a little personality to the town. Nobody called him by his first name. Druk rode a bike that was at least 20 years old and attended every event for every sport that Basso Hills Comprehensive High played, unless two events took place at the same time in separate towns. There were twenty or thirty men around town who would take Druk to out-of-town games, and he had all of them on speed dial – using a cell phone that was 10 or 15 years old. He was present for every football practice beginning with August two-a-days.

Track had always felt uneasy with Druk, even though he seemed to be casual buddies with every male in town over the age of 25. Yak felt depressed when he thought of the aimlessness of such a life. Druk apparently drew a check every month because his bike had been hit by the car of a speeding teen from a wealthy family years ago. At least that was what the rumors stated, and with “Drunkard” the rumors were told as fact. He made extra money by finding golf balls in the woods of Bending Pines. The other rumor was that he was a big-time drug dealer, with clients from all over the southeast. It was a laughable idea, but many told it as unquestionable truth. Anyway, Track felt that Druk had always been too friendly. The old guy seemed too fascinated with him – considering that he had usually shown more interest in gifted athletes. Track had never really been a superstar and had never been in the spotlight except for those “15 minutes of fame” in the TRACK ATTACKS game.

On this particular day, Track was alone at JJ’s Touchdown Grill. It was raining too hard for golf, and he wanted to hear local opinions on the football game from the previous night. “Oh crap, here he comes.” Druk was making his way over to the table. His blue jeans were frayed at the front pockets and at the knees. He had worn the same hoodie for many years, and it was hard to guess the original color of the sun-bleached garment. It was a mystery how Druk’s beard was never more than *or* less than a three-day’s growth. Some of his teeth had retained their original shade of white, but these were in the clear minority. He wore black high-top basketball shoes, and a white cap with the name of a local diner printed on the front.

“Track! You got a Minute?”

“Sure Druk, What can I do for you?”

The first words of his story began with “I’ve been waitin’ 15 years to tell ya this....” Bill Drukkard took the young man back in time to a lonely, dark golf course, and described how he had looked up from his job of finding balls just as Track took a swing from the tee box on # 5. He recalled the excitement he experienced – thinking the ball was going to “go right in the danged hole”. He had watched with curiosity as the teenager walked away without the golf ball.

“I gotta tell ya, I was halfway home with that ball before I realized what was goin’ on. People in this town think I’m dumb, but I actually got one of them analgesic minds. You know, I can sorta figure things out. I figured you was comin’ back later to see if the ball fell, and I was surprised you didn’t know that ten-second rule. Well, I had seen you around town enough to know you was a good kid, so I thought it was worth a fifteen-minute walk to go back and put the ball in the hole. I decided to just keep it as a secret, but I figured after all this time you wouldn’t care if I told ya.”

Track started to sense that some truly precious information was coming as the story began to take shape. He leaned forward and put his elbows on the table as Druk continued his story. “I wanted to tell ya it kinda made a difference in my life. I was trimmin’ bushes for your mom one day for 15 bucks, when I saw through the window that you had decorated the ball and put it in that plastic box thing. I was lucky that you had put it so close to the window, and I could read the date right off the ball. I was able to think back and figure out for sure that it was the ball I had returned. Anyway, it’s kinda stupid, but I got a charge out of it. I decided to try to find a way to do some kind of secret good deed about once a month. I even got to goin’ to a little church out of town where nobody knew me. I aint’ no perfect angel, but I look back at that hole-in-one as a turnin’ point in my life. I have a notebook at home that tells about the things I done for people since then. Anyway, I probably shouldn’t a told ya, but I did.”

Track coughed out a laugh and shook his head - staring at the floor. His mind was trying to wrap itself around an idea that was so completely pleasant and encouraging – that a life he thought was so wasted was actually very worthwhile. He tried to do the math and multiply how many good deeds were accomplished in fifteen years, with every year bringing roughly 12 more quiet victories. He determined that he had to see Druk’s good-deeds notebook sometime soon, and already anticipated the jolt of inspiration it would surely bring. He contemplated the strength of character this guy had - being willing to enjoy those altruistic deeds for their own sake, when his poor reputation in town seemed to cry out for them to be made public. The dude needed some good PR! Track laughed at himself for being so willing to believe for fifteen years that a perfect gust of wind had done him such a great favor. Suddenly he realized that Bill Drukkard was no longer seated at his table. He ran to the front door of the grill and looked in both directions down the sidewalk. He saw Druk preparing to cross the street and go to the courthouse square. “Druk! Come here!”

In a matter of seconds, the men were facing each other. Druk had a defensive look on his face, as if he were afraid of what Track would say until he saw a glint of moisture in the young man’s friendly eyes. As they shook hands, Track put his left arm around Druk’s shoulder. He didn’t speak for a moment. Finally, he cleared his throat, and blinked hard three times.

“Bill, you have no idea.....I mean, I just can’t tell you..... What I’m sayin’ is.....I would honestly love to buy you a meal. Do you have an hour or two for a steak? I’ll get you the biggest one in town!” The two men walked down the sidewalk together, both feeling sentimental and energetic on this damp September day. Just for a few strides, Travis Atkinson felt exactly 13 years old!