

Massachotts

Fock 2: Gawlf with a G

But we – as in Dash, Ban, Bash, Cliff, Patrick, or whoever, and I -- would typically golf until darkness enshrouded the Crumpin Fox woodlands, and dew moistened the Western Mass. grass, and the nocturnal Berkshires creatures began to stir and chirp and flaffle.

Our normal routine would be to tee off at noonish, play – and I do mean “play” – 1 through 17, then, with a quick scout-out down the 1st fairway to make sure nobody was coming, we would make a fleet and discreet move to the 2nd tee, and re-insert ourselves into the flow, and play – and I do mean “play” – 2 through 18. We almost never saw the 18th in daylight. And by that time, we were pretty much golfed out and partied out anyway. If anybody had tried to kick us off, we would have objected vehemently, but inside we would’ve been saying “OK, cool, enough’s enough anyway...”

But Crump would not boot us, though. By the time we’d finish putting out in the deep darkness of the 18th green, the clubhouse would be long-since darkened and deserted. Nobody would be there, finger-drumming, or toe-tapping impatiently for our carts to come in. Nah, not Crump. They just closed up shop and headed home. *Cart still out? So what? They’ll bring it back. Where they gonna go with it anyway? We’re outa here.*

One time, we booked a tee time in advance, only to be told on arrival – after our 100-mile ride to the course – that a tourney was imminent, and that our booking by some rookie counterlad had been a blunder. Before we could even puff up our chests, gather ire, or rally umbrage, we were cheerfully told to go on out and play forthwith on the unoccupied course, with apologies for the inconvenience of teeing off earlier than planned.

And when we strutted with confidence to teebox #1, we were greeted by smiling young women offering us a Wimbledon-esque brunch snack of strawberries and cream.

Ah, Crump. The best!

Alas, though, we couldn’t play there on Day 1 of RR2000. But since the day had already been slotted for golf, Mark, our fourth, invited us all to play *his* course, Wachusett Country Club.

Biznizmen who use the golf course to wheel and deal often say that they can tell how a man approaches the bizniz world by the way he golfs: is he aggressive, safe, reckless, timid, confident, fiercely competitive, a good strategist, a clutch performer?

Or, in our case: is he smilingly carefree, totally disinterested in turning placid recreation into competition or gambling, zealous and boisterous in equal measure over successes and failures alike, appreciative of nature’s beauty, respectful of course property, displaying blissful ignorance of irrationally restrictive codes, and contentedly awash in moderate doses of alcohol and the ever-present whatever? ;-]

So, you see, it’s not about golf. As an elderly gentleman that I once shared a Hilton Head golf cart with once proclaimed, “The order of the day is fellowship. Competition be damned.” He probably just decreed that because we were all having a ghastly day of what would barely pass for golf, but it was a noble sentiment nonetheless. Or nevertheless.

Knowing that Wachusett would be no Crump, but also knowing that it would be nice, and also also knowing that gawfin’ with those three guys would transcend mere golf anyway, I took the change in plan in stride.

Well, Mark’s directions did have a slight flaw in them – it’s Route 20 *WEST*, not east, Mark! – so I was tardy. Oops, I’m in Massachusetts now, and my Boston roots are showing, so I was *tahhhdy*.

By the time I reached WCC, my group had already teed off. In the pro shop, nobody seemed to be personing the counter, so, using my well-oiled party-crashing techniques, I adopted the “Damn it, I Belong Here!” demeanor, and just starting walking down the first fairway.

Now, my friends will tell you that I am a large guy (6’3”, 190 pounds) who doesn’t usually like to act like a large guy. But when a moment like this arises, it can behoove one to maximize one’s stature.

This, of course, is the bolder of the two principal options. One could meekly try to blend in, play the chameleon, and become visibly indistinct from the crowd. This is the stealthy method, the way of the sneak, the squirrely “ooh, I hope I don’t get caught” approach.

But I was wearing a bright white-and-blue floral Hawaiian shirt, and the very distinctive black leather cowboy hat that I had bought in Key West nearly a decade before, so the blending-in thing didn't seem like the slickest way to pull this off.

Option Two, then, is "Maximize and Defy": rise to full height, deliberately stand out from the skulking masses, flaunt my badass lid, dazzle them with the party shirt on their staid country club fairways, walk with a purpose and a swagger, don't condescend to offer anybody eye contact, and tacitly *dare* anybody to say, "Excuse me, sir, do you belong here?"

When I found my playing partners, they were already on the third tee. Dash would later say that he recognized that Purposeful Stride from 400 yards away. The day was darkly gray and windy when our karmas commingled. It occurred to me that in any other situation, appearance being as it was – that hat, that shirt, my two-tone suede Cole Hahn shoes with golden spikes, my one snug white leather glove (didn't Michael Jackson do that mono-glove thing for a while?), and brandishing a long graphite and aluminum rod – I would be deemed a loony with a weapon. But here at The Club, I fit right in. That speaks volumes about golf to begin with. At least I wasn't wearing plaid pants.

We assumed the role of golfers, raised a toast to the day, and made a burnt offering to keep the Evil Snowmen away [for you non-golfers, Snowman = 8 – I know, I *know*, it's actually a headless snowman]. We then watched without surprise as the clouds began to thin, the sky brighten, and the wind diminish. By the fifth tee, a deep azure sky, vivid sunshine, and a genial zephyr had chased the gloom away.

This was not unusual. Many a dubious day had gone dandy when Dash, Ban, and RAM blended attitudes. We've had some soakers and freezers too, of course – most notably at Patriots games -- but we seem to catch some damn good breaks quite a bit.

Dash (right, in basic crumpin' position) is the straw that stirs the cocktail though, or the match that ignites the spliff, if you will. Seemingly unflappable, he is one of those uncommon guys who has an uncanny way of effortlessly making every situation seem smooth, easy, and under control. He would be an outstanding person to work with. In a group, he is the non-leading leader: somebody else may appear to be the kingpin, but the shots that Dash calls are the ones that usually go.



He is a rare voice of reason, fun, and balance. I can't remember anybody ever being mad at Dash. His contagious good nature just makes the room feel better. Some people thrive on creating tension as they walk into the room – Halston, my coaching boss when I was at MIT, was like that (and he would proudly admit it) – but Dash, conversely, promotes calm and good will. I'm sure he has his bad moments – we all do – but spending time with Dash is like having a soft ice cream cone: smooth, cool, and enjoyable.

Ban is an excellent complement. A marketing maven who seems in his heart to parody marketing mavens, Ban is a big guy with a quick wit, a delightfully hearty laugh, and an "I am out with the boys, so let's make it count!" attitude.

Ban had my Dream Job for a while: touring the world on the lead promotion team for professional golf tournaments. He got to play some of the world's best courses, and even got to shack up on the QEII, anchored off the Portuguese coast, throughout the 1997 Ryder Cup matches at Valderama.

Trouble was, Ban is not what you would call a Golfer. He plays golf, but with a crunched-up, bastardized, off-balanced swing, that is a combination of just about every compensation and counter-adjustment that the human body can make. His hooded 5-iron tee shots shoot impossibly right, but then, with zing and verve, swoop devilishly left, and skim with wild abandon across hill and vale. Unfortunately, if there are obstructions to the right, Ban is fucked. If the hill and vale lead to woods or water, he's also fucked.

I mean, none of *us* give a penguin's pud about that, but on these elite courses, it must have been eye-catching . . . especially since he worked for *GOLF DIGEST*, and had their name proudly emblazoned on his shirt, hat, and golf bag. I can't help but think that, had his game been more representative of the

fundamentals and in-the-know skills that that magazine preached, he may be with them yet. But what do I know?

But, like I said, we didn't give a hairy hoot where his ball went, or how hellish his swing looked: fellowship was definitely the order of our day, not golfing prowess. Pshaw on that twaddle!

And, like good friends should, Ban came up with a top-notch zinger on me that day. If you can't insult your friends, who can you insult, I always say.

We were hanging out on the eighth tee, preparing a puff o' gratitude to the Gawlfing Gawds, when Mark happened to mention that, with the cowboy hat just so, "...you look just like Kevin Costner in....I forget the name of the movie, but..."

At that point, just as my ego was beginning to dig the Costner comparison, Ban jumped in to help: "Yeah! Isn't that the movie where he plays the dying AIDS patient?" Ouch. That hissing sound you hear is my ego deflating.

It's human nature to want something for nothing. We beat the system and win the game when we get without giving.

And when it really doesn't cost the "victim" anything, then, hey hey, who gives a crud?

Golf is like that. You sneak on, or you slyly get in a few extra holes, and so freaking what? It's not like you've used up some finite amount of golfability that is contained within those acres. These are fields and forests and ponds. This is non-mechanical Earth. It is dressed up a tad artificially, yes, but it sure does look nice. On a beautiful day, there are few places as relaxing, as soothing, as naturally inspiring as a golf course is.

Negative ions, mate. Lots and lots of 'em.

So, if you are slick enough to avoid paying, then so wahoochie what? It won't show up on inventory. Nobody else will be deprived of the opportunity to golf because *you* used up a dozen of his holes. It won't get docked out of the clubhouse douchebag's paycheck. No harm, no foul, baybeeee. It only means that the millionaire course owners will gouge a little less profit than they wanted to. That's all. And I, for one, can live with that. :]

At Crump, we played our bonus holes, but at Ponkapoag, the battered, downtrodden and woefully underfunded public loop (i.e., paid for with our tax dollars) we were all weaned on, the sky was the limit. We took anything and everything we could get.

The course was classic public golf. The price was low, and you got what you paid for -- if you paid at all. The layout was actually quite nice -- two full 18-hole courses -- but Ponky was lower than sewer polishing on the Metropolitan District Commission's priority maintenance list, and annual budget cuts left it in sad disrepair and staffed by people who really didn't give a ferret's fanny what went on out there.

You could play shirtless. You could drink in the open. You could play demo derby with the carts. Nobody cared. Most of the tee boxes were worn bare and the dirt was so packed that you had to hammer your tee into the ground with your clubhead. There were few ballwashers, and those that existed had no water and no towel. If you wanted your ball cleaned, you spat on it and wiped in on your shorts.

The greens routinely had numerous burnt-out or diseased-out bare spots that I lovingly tabbed "grimaces." It was not surprising to find crab grass infiltrating the putting surface. I can even remember the 7th green on the #1 course being dug up and replanted, yet what grew in was 100% crabgrass. The grounds crew just cut it real short and said "screw it." It was ludicrous. (But Prev still canned a 50-foot putt across crabgrass to beat Cliff and I in a cutthroat putting contest one day.)

Ponky's fairways were soggy, silty mud in the lowlands, and burnt desert dry in the plateaus. The bunkers might as well have been just a dirt quarry. The water hazards were a copper-tint, with oily rainbows swirling around the ripples your ball made. It was pretty. It was gross. It was pretty gross.

Dash and Cliff and I thought we were truly the turtle's tits because we had the system wrapped so tightly around our pinkies that we could dodge paying greens fees but still be allowed to rent a cart. Since you paid for them in separate places -- a very stupid arrangement -- we quickly deduced that you could go to the cart shack and procure a cart without ever stopping to pay greens fees first. The cart guy always assumed that you *must* have paid your greens fees, or you wouldn't have the sack to be renting a cart. And since there was seldom a starter, there was nobody to check you out at the first tee either. Even if there was, he made the same assumption as the cart guy. It was child's play.

But Danno burst our smug bubble one day, though, when he smirkingly showed off a master key all of his very ownsies, which entitled him to any Ponky cart of his choosing whenever the whim possessed him. Smooth, Danno, very smooth.

I think he finally lost the key when he skidded his borrowed cart for a few 360's down a rain-slicked slope and it careened – barely without its leaping passengers – into one of Ponky's murky water hazards.

Wachusett, though, turned out to be a fine course that made good use of the rolling wooded western New England terrain. We played like we always do: neither bad nor good. There were enough good shots for us to enjoy the game, and enough shitty shots to keep us humble and entertained.

As always, scores were not kept. Whoever began the practice of counting the shots and *nyeah-nyeah*-ing his playing partner because he hit his ball fewer times really ruined the casual fun aspect of the activity.

One duck hook that goes careening into the marshland, or a bladed sand wedge that rockets into the parking lot, is nowhere near as disturbing when there are none of those pesty penalties assessed.

It's such an insult. You hit a blatantly incompetent shot and you're already disappointed. Your abilities have proven to be far less than you had hoped and imagined they would be, and your self-esteem has taken a beating. *Then*, you get slapped with extra points just because some asswipe thought he'd be clever by jamming a few white stakes into the ground and declaring you Out Of Bounds! Bah, I say! I have plenty of bounds! I ain't out of 'em! I'm getting' a little low on golf balls, but I got lots and lots o' bounds.

The aggravations of score-keeping-golf were enough to make me give up the game in my club-tossing late teens. Eventually, though, Dash and Cliff showed me how much more fun the game could be with beer in the bag, grass in other places besides on the ground, and no pencils allowed. MUCH better game! I got re-hooked, and wondered what the hell I had been doing in those club-slamming, bogey-cursing days of impetuous and fiery young manhood. Another misguided concept rescued by alcohol.

Many people make the scoring aspect of golf even worse by insisting on playing for money. I *hate* these people!! Goddamn, talk about aggravating! Not only are penalties slapped across my face, but now my spaz attacks cost me money too?? No farking way, hozay!

See? That wasn't really about Gawwwlf, now, was it?

But if you did roll your eyes and grimace when you believed Golf Talk was imminent, it's easy to understand why: because golf begins with a G, and G is a shittyass letter. It's another one of those identity-crisis, schizo things that irk me so.

What would you expect, though? G is just C with a hook on it, and we've already discussed what a lame letter C is.

G *can* be predictable and consistent, like in *good*, *giggle*, *gargantuan*, and *greasy gross maggots*. But then it goes and tries to take over J's territory. *George* is consistent, but where did the *guh* sound go? If it sounds like J, why not just use J, damn it?? Poor freaking J, languishing in the throwaway pile with a rank of 23rd out of 26, getting used only 0.2% of the time, while G, not exactly kicking tail itself at 17th (2.0%), steals so much of the J-thunder. Even its name – *jee* -- steals J's sound. *Giant*, *geriatric*, *gerbil*, and *genetically-mutated genitals* should all be filed under J, not G.

What really vexes me, though, is when G goes schizoid within a word! *Gorgeous*, *language*, *garage*, and *regurgitate*, all change from *guh* to *juh* before it's even out of your mouth. WTF is up with that? And *gigolo* goes the other way: *juh* to *guh*. Lord help us.

And when you learn those words, there is no set rule: G gets a gaggle of those pain in the ass "exceptions" that our language is famous for. Sometimes, a following "e" will change *guh* to *juh*, but not always: you can sing about your clothes, though they might get singed in a fire, but what would you call the person responsible for doing the singing while you were doing the singing, the singer, or the singer?

And would you ever deliberately put your dinger in danger? Maybe if it was gettin' dingy. You just might put a dingy dinger in danger, dang it.

What a bullshit letter.

But what really toasts my tweedie is the back-to-back switcheroo, where you have two straight G's – that is, GG – and they are pronounced DIFFERENTLY!!! God damn it!!! "Biggest" is fine, but what about "Suggest"? What changed that second G?? Was it the insidious influence of that malcontented and least-used vowel, "u"? "Slugger" doesn't think so.

Even the "-ing" suffix employs G (which fattens its stats quite a bit), but only in formal and proper company. Otherwise, we be droppin' that frikkin' letter whenever we be feelin' casual. And a splendid good riddance to it.

Oh, and the WORST of all, is all that SILENT blatherskite that G is in the thick of. WT-freakin'-F?? The letter's there, but you can't hear it?? Ohhhh-kaaaaay. Makes you want to gnash your teeth, gnaw on a gnarled gnocchi, and cough up phlegm.

[Yeah, I know, K has its silent moments too. Bite me.]

And speaking of phlegm (which I try not to do), why is the G silent in phlegm, but speaks up in phlegmatic?

G just plain sucks. All of the above is bad enough, but G is also a major player in the worst clusterfuck in the whole language: the "ough" combination. I mean, what in unholy hell is up with *this* mish-mash??

You start out with *trough*, and you get an *off* sound.

Add an H, and it's *oo* in *through*.

Remove the R, and it's *oh* in *though*.

Pluck out the H, and it's *uff* in *tough*.

Tack a T on the end, and it's *aw* in *thought*.

And trade TH in for a DR, and it's *ow* in *drought*.

And it SHOULD be pronounced *oh-oo-guh-huh*.

Would you believe that of all the words G appears in, it is silent 40% of the time? The combinations *ign*, *igh*, *ight*, *ough*, *gn* all give G a totally free ride. Who the hell put G in there?! And why????

So grab G by the gonads and get it gone, guys and gals. Too many alter-ego's. Too much secretive stuff. Make those *ough*'s phonetic. Tho I thot it thru, I decided not to tuff out the drowt in my troff.

Yeah, maybe writing a letter to Jorj will take some getting used to, but names will not be misfiled, gnomes will gnaw seem nicer, and gnus will gnot make gnews, though gnats will gnever be less gnasty.

And can we please let J handle its own bizniz? J is cool. No tricks with J. It is what it is, and that's all it is (at least in English). J just jumps joyfully into the jumble whenever a J is justified.

Look where J is on the keyboard: right index home! That is **choice** location! You don't get any better than that! But 99.8% of the time, it's some other key that gets plipped.

Oh, how much of a taunt and a tease is that for J? Its fellow outcasts X, Q, and Z – the real lepers of the alphabet (the Scrabble ten-pointers) – all cower off to the side for the left pinky and ring finger to strike with disdain. But J stands ready, boldly calling out for attention. How galling must it be for J to get such a close view of the left index finger caressing and stroking G in so many ill-assigned words, while the right index drifts hither and yon among YUHNM78 (and maybe B), all but ignoring its primary charge.

And what's next to J? K!!! Freakin' K! My Any Key! How do such scorned letters get such prime real estate? How can a righty's two most powerful fingers resist them? Look at them there, just waiting! Makes you want to joke with Jack about being a jerk. Or write about Kijij, the magic clown of Jujukoko. Or just kinda jot junk like that.

The keyboard layout makes for some fun words, though. Lollipop is all right hand, but no index finger (it's too busy keeping J covered). Your fingers do a lithe little lollipop dance while your left hand snoozes. And Duggy used to work for State Street bank in Boston, and there e-mail server was "statestreet.com" – the statestreet part was cool to type, keeping the left hand occupied so the right can quickly grab the beer bottle and give the thirsty typer a quick swig without missing a word.

The arrangement, of course, all goes back to that dude in the early 1900's who laid out the keys to keep the most common letters (E,T,A,I,O,N....) from jamming up all the time, but it still seems weird to me. For instance, look where A is: left pinky! How awful is that?? It's the third most used letter (8.2%), and it employs the lamest finger we (collectively, in this righty's world) have. That was just plain dumb placement.

I'm sure there were many, many young typists like myself who went through grade school with just a monstrously heavy, cast-iron, Olivetti Manual Typewriter with sluggish keys scattered across the board, and who found A to be a very exasperating experience.

On my beast, the A key was by far the worst. Gummed by years of dust, neglect, and small moist droppings punched and bled from battered and tattered ribbons, you needed full force to snap that little sucker down. If I had ever tried to type normally, my A's would have been ghostly gray shadowy forms or blank spaces. But man (or in this case, boy) is an adaptable creature, and I learned to fit my typing style to match the equipment. To this day, the left index hovers over the shift key and the QWASZX region

while my more talented right hand spreads wide and dances frenetically across the rest of the symbols. If I need an upper case A, then left thumb touches down on Shift just a millisecond before left index plunks A. And I've been tested at a respectable 50 wpm with that method.

I was a precocious typer, having learned as early as fifth grade that there was brownie point value in typed homework. So, I had a good five years of such of-necessity, self-taught technique before I got into Bro. Leo Francis' tenth grade Typing class. Br. Leo had gotten on a bit in years, so other than an occasional ten-second stroll across the front of the room, he pretty much sat at his desk (one of those high-rise jobs) and droned out his mantra for the day -- "A-S-D-F...J-K-L-semi... A-S-D-F...J-K-L-semi... A-S-D-F...J-K-L-semi... A-S-D-F...J-K-L-semi..." -- as we dutifully drilled along.

But I was a slender youngster, having not yet discovered how well beer will put meat on your bones, and my under-developed pinky just wanted nothing to do with it. Since I always sat in the back of the room anyway, I rebelled against authority, subverted the dominant paradigm, and just continued to do it my own way, further ingraining my unique style.

Now that laptops are the norm for me, I find the slightly smaller keyboards an absolute boon, as I can't even fit my full-grown, lanky hands comfortably over their home keys.

[By the way, I made up that 40%-silent thing. Sounded good, though, didn't it? If anybody knows the true figure, or would like to count silent G's vs. sounded G's in this chapter (both as *guh* and as *juh*) as an Extra Credit project, I would love to know the accurate percentage.]

And also by the way, "by the way" is a pretty dumb phrase, isn't it? "By the way." What way? It appears to be referring to a specific "way", unlike the vague variety offered by "anyway." But you're not actually *at* the way, or *on* the way, or *in* the way (in which case, you would be asked to get *out of* the way), you are just *by* it. Somewhere near you is "the way."

Just another colloquialism, I reckon. Odd phrase, but easier on the mind than "incidentally" is.

English must be so hard to learn. Fili sure thought so. He was the top waiter at the Westin Resort in Hilton Head for a while. A native Mexican, he was truly The Man when it came to serving the wealthy with style and grace. His English was pretty good, but you could see gaps here and there. He once asked me when to use the word "the," as in "Don't drink water" versus "Don't drink the water." The answer took far longer than I had anticipated. Anyway, Fili's classic line to me was "My girlfriend told me that I have to behave, so I am being have." [He pronounced it *hayve*.]

Well, well, well.

Sigh. [Another silent G.]