



*A search to find my golf game – and myself – as a Princeton philosophy major*

# NOW AND ZEN

by CONNOR BELCASTRO

photos by JONATHAN KOLBE

**T**O BE A GOLFER is to be constantly on the verge, awaiting one's own arrival. We are playing not against opponents but against ourselves, exposing our own weaknesses, and building ourselves back stronger. From a flawed present, we create a better future.

If all that sounds more like philosophy than physics or applied mathematics, it should. I'm a college senior, majoring in philosophy. After growing up a STEM kid who used science and math to make sense of my world, I have since become more interested in questions that STEM couldn't answer, both on and off the course.

*The past is both immutable and inaccessible; we must come from it, but we never can return. "No man steps in the same river twice," said the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, "for it is not the same river and he is not the same man."*

I began as a Fisher-Price golfer. Once I could walk, my dad gave me two blue plastic clubs – a putter and an iron, each double-sided. I hit balls around the yard with both sides, engrossed for hours in that single-minded concentration mustered only by the highly trained and those too young to know another way. Most of all, I remember the simple love of pure contact, of the merging of imagination and reality, of watching the ball trace the path in my mind's eye.

I remember first learning about the new Strokes Gained analysis, sitting in a cart as my coach explained how progress to the hole could be measured not in yards but in strokes. It fit perfectly into my rational approach to my world, a world of propositions. Gone were the imprecise days of fairways-hit percentage and putts per green in regulation; now, a 340-yard drive and a 3-foot putt could be compared. The future had arrived, concrete and quantifiable.

Golf became "Moneyball." Instead of abstract dreams of a PGA Tour card, I could strive for Tour Average. Statistics showed timeless conventional wisdom – "stay below the hole," "lay up with an iron" – to be old wives' tales. The game contained no magic, for nothing about it could not be understood via fact or figure. Just play by the basic strategy card and beat the house.

I understood these metrics as the one true path –

**The author, who began his golf journey as a toddler swinging plastic clubs, prepares for a practice session during the fall season at Princeton University.**



moral imperatives bestowed from the higher place I strived to reach. Targets were centers of dispersion patterns, selected with a yard's precision. I hit the gym twice a day. I meditated to change myself into an unflappable competitor. (Only later would I see the irony in this, as meditation is about presence in the current moment – the very opposite of my goal at the time.)

I met any imperfection with analysis and criticism, for from perfect information and perfect execution should come perfect golf, and I expected nothing less than golf omnipotence. It couldn't be that hard, could it?

**I**n the early 20th century, Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell co-wrote the "Principia Mathematica," which claimed to establish an entirely cogent system of fundamental mathematical logic. Their system was meant as an infinitely solid foundation upon which all mathematics could rest. Just 20 years later, Kurt Gödel used these tenets to construct his incompleteness theorems, proving that a consistent system of axioms cannot prove all true statements as true – proof that Whitehead's and Russell's project could never function as intended, that even math always would

include a degree of inexplicability. That mankind was doomed, Sisyphus-like, to wonder.

Armed with my statistics and schools of thought, my expert opinions and capital-T Truths, I would stand on the first tee smug in the knowledge that I had more firepower than my competitors. I had a better swing, a better game plan, a better body, a better mind. I could watch them chase sucker pins, breathe heavily walking up hills, mutter negative self-talk, and be certain that I was further along the path to golf enlightenment.

Yet, when we arrived at the scoring tent, I often found

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event qualified for another event – so important then, now lost to memory – and I stood on the 11th tee feeling it all slip away.

Then I birdied five of the next six holes and finished tied for second.

Some players describe a feeling of grace washing over them during such moments. I couldn't speak to this. I was too engrossed in my course notes and wind charts, going through the motions of a breathing exercise.

Something had allowed me to get out of my own way – to hit shot after shot where the ball traced the path in my mind's eye. But what? At the time, desperate for an answer I could understand and replicate, I attributed this success to, of all things, a song stuck in my head – that

I had mustered enough concentration to keep one tune playing internally for the whole round. For the next two weeks, I tried to recreate this musical concentration, listening to the song on loop through headphones while I practiced, found lackluster results, and abandoned the notion.

At the time of writing, I am merely the world's 3,210th-ranked amateur golfer. Going into my

senior year, I have accumulated just one top-20 college finish. By all measurable metrics, barring a quick turnaround I am bound for a mediocre and unmemorable college career.

Yet as I begin to become myself, I find great hope. I recognize that, while statistics describe an accumulation of events frozen in the past, they do not control this delicate, animate present. That as valuable as sound strategy and preparation are, they do nothing to hole this 8-foot putt in front of me. Numbers cause nothing in the present – I do. Amid a slurry of thoughts about the way things should be, good golf comes from the way things are.

I now understand that whatever I accessed that day at Wintonbury Hills, it's something I've stumbled upon, unknowingly, every time I've played my best golf. In these moments of brilliance, golf is not my laboratory but my Walden Pond, my Bodhi Tree. It is Heraclitus' river discovered anew after a long journey, returning both as myself and a new man. A place to take off my shoes and feel familiar water running over my golf-tanned feet as I wade in. ♣

myself beaten. Time and time again, I would walk to the parking lot, ruminating on the imperfection in myself I'd yet to reveal, the sin I'd yet to absolve myself of, asking: "What do they know that I don't?"

Occasionally, things did click. I played well enough to win a state junior championship. Still, success felt remains relative to success expected, and I expected nothing less than golf omnipotence. I continued to meet any imperfection with analysis and criticism. Golf is a game of imperfection, but if I could find the causes of that imperfection – for each bad shot X, there exists a causal factor Y responsible for its deviation from the ideal – then I might be able to achieve ultimate athletic salvation.

**I** remember the 2018 Computer Merchant Cup at Wintonbury Hills Golf Course, outside Hartford, just starting the big make-or-break summer for college recruiting. I played the front nine around par, drove into the right rough on No. 10, caught a nasty flier into thick fescue, and eventually found myself writing an "8" on the scorecard. The top finishers from this